DOCTOR WHO™

SHORT TRIPS: TRANSMISSIONS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

RICHARD SALTER

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CONTENTS

Doctor Who and the Adaptation of Death Graeme Burk **1**

Policy to Invade Ian Mond **15**

Only Connect Andy Lane **31**

Gudok Mags Halliday **44**

Generation Gap Lou Anders **62**

Lonely Richard Wright **78**

Blue Road Dance James Milton **91**

Tweaker Dan Abnett **111**

Link Pete Kempshall **123**

Driftwood Dale Smith **140**

Methuselah George Mann **153**

Nettles Kelly Hale **169**

Larkspur Mark Stevens **181**

See No Evil Steve Lyons **201**

iNtRUsioNs Dave Hoskin **213**

Breadcrumbs James Moran **227**

Transmission Ends Richard Salter **238**

About the Authors **258**

Doctor Who and the

Adaptation of Death

Graeme Burk

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor, with Charley

A remarkable story of heroism and resistance.

The RapidoMovieBlog

****** A movie with the action, adventure, drama and excitement that can only come from one of the human race's greatest moments in history.*

The WexTroHollywood Reportertron

A boring, overlong, noisy and ultimately schlocky movie that purports to tell the story behind the brave men, women and aliens that repelled the Quav'lor Invasion. Great special effects.

The Toronto BellGlobeMedia and Mail

All things considered, I should have ordered the orange juice.

I didn't, though. I ordered the grapefruit juice. I don't even like grapefruit – they're weapons of mass bitterness; only good with the right combination of soda and liquor. Unfortunately, I was having a meeting with Murray, my agent, and he always looks so *healthy* –

like Adonis's stunt double on steroids. I wanted to prove to him that I was making healthy choices too. The only problem was I now had to drink this fruit bile without grimacing –which is harder than it looks.

This was precisely what I was attempting while I was listening to Murray tell me about how a producer, who has an option on PQ

Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Moon Dentist*, was interested in me and that the fee was 20 million with 5 points off the back end and could we meet next Tuesday... when there was a bright light –

like death, or a Cher concert – and the next thing I knew I was

surrounded by men with massive heads.

Each man's head was gigantic, about the size of his whole body,

which was two or so feet The men were seated around me in a semi-1

circle. They were all bald and wore shimmery off-white – more of an eggshell – robes which included a gigantic hood that covered the back of their, well, giant heads. There were ten of them, their thin, wide lips pursed and their jumbo-sized green eyes all staring at me.

It was at that point I realised I was strapped into a severe-looking metallic chair that looked like something H.R. Giger spat up after a bad Thai meal. The room looked industrially sinister in an East

German way. Finally, the giant head directly opposite me – the one who was wearing a decorative purple and yellow robe that led me to believe he was in charge – spoke in a high-pitched, nasal voice.

'State your name and profession,' he commanded.

'My name is Ari Leventhal,' I said. 'I'm a screenwriter,

represented by Murray Jelg of Creatron Artists and Artisans

Associates.'

'Ari Leventhal,' the Head Head said slowly, with the gravity of a large planetary body, 'you are hereby accused of misrepresenting the Kubthukian race in your screenplay, *Invasion Earth: 2062 AD*.'

He paused. I prayed the punishment for this somehow involved

eating cheese.

'The sentence is Death.'

That wasn't promising. Big Alien Heads wanted me dead and I'm

stuck with the taste of grapefruit in my mouth.

INT. SPACESHIP – CORRIDOR – NIGHT

The Quav'lor spacecraft is an iron nightmare of twisted metal

pathways about thirty feet tall and twenty feet across. It's

dark, and ooze is dripping off of everything that is already covered in a haze of black smoke. An EXPLOSION rocks the corridor, blowing a hole in the side of the ship. GENERAL JOHN JEREMIAH IRONS takes the lead followed by CAPTAIN DIEGO and his crack team of 5 MARINES. Bringing up the lead is BIG HEAD, his little legs and arms skittering in cowardice. They're all wearing cam stick on their faces (even BIG HEAD) and dressed in combat fatigues and heavily armed (except BIG HEAD).

IRONS: Well, that's one way to make an entrance.

DIEGO: I like the direct approach.

BIG HEAD: Aye-yi-yi-yi... Actually, stealth access could have been achieved by...

DIEGO: Shut up, Big Head.

IRONS: How long do you think we have until...?

REVERSE ANGLE on a QUAV'LOR WARRIOR shrieking violently. It rears back, revealing itself to be almost twenty feet tall, its lizard tail smashing into the wall. Razor-sharp instincts take hold of IRONS as he wheels toward the WARRIOR firing his RADIUM MACHINE GUN. Magnesium sparks ping off the lizard. The other MARINES join in. The WARRIOR stumbles back and falls down with a sickening thud.

DIEGO: One down...

They look toward the corridor behind the dead WARRIOR and see dozens of WARRIORS moving as fast as their giant iguana legs will take them.

IRONS: 7,000 to go. (Barks an order) All right people! Let's move!

CUT TO

INT. SPACESHIP – CORRIDOR JUNCTION – NIGHT

IRONS, DIEGO and his MARINES back down a corridor, machine guns blazing as they are pursued by a growing number of QUAV'LOR WARRIORS. In spite of the numbers, the MARINES, DIEGO and IRONS are holding them back. They stop at a junction where the corridor splits into three. BIG HEAD is completely flustered by all the noise and confusion and tries to cover his massive ears.

IRONS: Big Head! Which way do we go to get to the Hive Chamber?

BIG HEAD: Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi... this is no place for my-yi-yi-yi!

BIG HEAD attempts to run. IRONS grabs him by his giant nose and twists.

IRONS: Look, you said you knew how to get us to the Hive Chamber! How do we get there?

BIG HEAD: Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi it's... it's that way.

BIG HEAD points to a corridor to their left. IRONS lets go of BIG HEAD's big nose and turns to the CORRIDOR...

where 20 QUAV'LOR WARRIORS are running towards the

humans and BIG HEAD. The MARINES know what to do.

They toss their machine guns in the air...

IN BULLET TIME: While the guns hurtle upward, the MARINES reach for their ATOMIC BAZOOKAS and fire them. FIVE shells, in slow time, spin toward the WARRIORS. As the shells EXPLODE on contact with their targets, the MACHINE GUNS head back toward the ground. The MARINES chuck the bazookas and catch the MACHINE GUNS.

SNAP BACK INTO REAL TIME: The Marines start firing and advancing down the corridor.

CUT TO

INT. SPACESHIP – HIVEMIND ENTRANCE – NIGHT

The entrance to the hive chamber is like a gigantic old rusted camera iris. There's a small terminal beside it. IRONS studies it closely.

BIG HEAD: Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi. There's 40 trillion combinations to that, but it can be solved very simply using...

IRONS unholsters his REVOLVER and fires a couple of rounds into the terminal. The ENTRANCE opens.

DIEGO: Well, that's one way to make an entrance.

IRONS: I like the direct approach.

‘Did you write that?’ the Head Head asked me.

‘Kal-El Cage asked for changes to his dialogue but, otherwise,

yes.’

The Head Head furrowed his brow. ‘Summon the referent.’

Two service droids glided in at this point, carrying a man

strapped into another dangerous-looking chair. The robots

unceremoniously dumped him beside me. The guy looks like he

either came from a very camp wedding or he was an extra in a

production of *Dickens in Love* – he’s dressed in a morning coat, waistcoat, high-collared shirt and cravat. His long brown hair

suggested the former; the English accent suggested either. ‘I really must strenuously object to this,’ the camp groom protested. ‘I was perfectly happy to offer a deposition. You didn’t need to hijack my ship like –’

‘The referent will remain silent. We will use your psychospoor to create a four-dimensional simulacrum.’

‘A four-dimensional *what*?’ I asked.

‘A recreation of events using my memories as a locus to draw in

the psycho-chronal energy left behind by events. It’s like a Time-Space Visualiser only much more sophisticated. I’m the Doctor by the –’

The Doctor didn’t finish his sentence as he suddenly lit up like a million glowsticks at an Apple Coldplay concert.

The Head Head cast a huge eye upon a display terminal in front

of him. ‘It has been verified that the referent was present during these events.’ He addressed the Doctor. ‘Now, would you agree that this is an accurate representation of what happened?’

The Doctor was under considerable strain. Wincing with pain, he

growled, ‘No it isn’t.’

The first thing Charley noticed about the Quav’lor spaceship was how red it all was. Every surface in the ship was a reddish material that looked like semi-hardened jelly. She half-expected Cook to

come round to scold her for being in the pantry with all the sweets.

Thoughts like this distracted her from the blinding headache that was emerging from behind her eyes. All these years travelling with the Doctor, she still bated transmats. There was something sinister about the way they disassembled things a nanometer at a time and reassembled them. She told the Doctor, ‘It’s like killing something in one place and bringing it to life in another.’ The Doctor muttered something about Charley one day becoming a brilliant Quantum

Philosopher and then told her to get in, *now*.

Charley struggled to right herself and noticed the other Marines –

Corporal Sandoval, Sergeant Miller and Private Langley – didn’t

enjoy being teleported into the heart of the Quav’lor ship either. The Doctor was already poking his head outside a red, lozenge-shaped door and looking into the nearby corridor. Having assessed the

situation, he bounded back to where Charley and the Marines were recovering.

‘I respect that as a Time Lord you have a capacity to shrug off

transmats, but do you have to be so bloody smug about it?’

‘Language, Charlotte,’ the Doctor chided. ‘If it’s any consolation, Ekode got over it faster than me. He’s already outside scouting out the location of the HiveMind Chamber.’

‘Alone?’

‘I wasn’t in a position to argue. That transmat wasn’t designed for organic matter.’

‘ *Now* you tell me?’

Charley was prevented from throttling the Doctor when Corporal

Sandoval handed him the ComLink, informing him, ‘It’s the

General.'

The Doctor rolled his eyes and grabbed the ComLink. 'General,

I'd love to chat, but I'm in the middle of a mission to save the human race.' There was electronic static and something indistinct.

'Not many. It's a skeleton crew. They're in a hibernation cycle,' the Doctor responded. Another squawk of noise. 'Thank you General.

Good luck to you too.' The Doctor tossed the ComLink back to

Sandoval.

'How could you understand that?' Charley asked.

The Doctor shrugged. 'I didn't hear a word he said.'

Ekode Blath Negen Blar Regen Blen Parthimi, the appointed

representative of the Kubthukian Aesthetic, stood before the

HiveMind Chamber entrance. His hearing was not what it had been, but it was still considerably better than any human or Quavlor's and enabled him to elude the enemy. He had transmitted the coordinates to the humans and the one with two hearts called the Doctor and

they would soon arrive.

He pensively pushed out his vast lower lip. The task ahead

troubled Ekode in his inmost thoughts. If he had been younger,

Ekode would have disputed the Aesthetic's decision to cooperate

with the humans. But Ekode was the elder member, which meant he

was obligated – above all other concerns – to participate in such a vital mission since he had led a good life and was closest to death.

Footsteps grew in the distance. Ekode opened an inspection hatch on the adjacent wall and crawled inside. He watched through a

grille as the sound of footsteps became the sight of footsteps. The Quav'lor were short and squat and their gait was slightly bowlegged

because of the stump of a vestigial tail they possessed. Lightweight armour covered their yellow scales. A thin, forked tongue

occasionally darted out of each elongated head, but the Quav'lor were otherwise unconcerned with anything other than ambling

down the corridor.

The footsteps eventually receded into the bowels of the ship.

Ekode had just begun to extricate himself from the inspection hatch when he heard more footsteps – only these were deliberately

intended to be stealthy. He froze as he waited to detect their scent.

Once he realised it was the humans and the Doctor, he emerged into the corridor once more.

The Doctor was the first to arrive. 'Good work, Ekode.' He spoke with a cheerfulness that made the skin on the hack of Ekode's neck crawl. He could perceive that, whatever the Doctor was, he was too used to the sight of death.

'We have much to do,' Ekode replied diffidently.

6

The Doctor meanwhile turned his attention to the chamber door.

The female called Charley went to help, while the soldiers took up strategic positions to cover the corridor. The Doctor was waving some sort of a sonic device at the door. The sound was sharp

enough to make Ekode wince.

'Sorry Ekode,' said the Doctor awkwardly. 'I forgot your

tympanic membrane is larger than most.' Ekode nodded politely.

Charley attempted to offer helpful suggestions. 'If we can't use the sonic screwdriver then what about some explosives?'

'The door is pure duralinium alloy.' The Doctor was lost in

thought.

'What about cracking the combination to the lock?'

‘Charley, it’s not like it’s a safe waiting for Raffles to break into it. This is an advanced artificially intelligent lock with 40 trillion logarithmic combinations. No, I think we need the unique talent on offer.’

The Doctor turned to Ekode and bowed deferentially – a gesture

that Ekode thought showed proper respect. ‘Ekode, I need your

help.’ The Doctor’s request showed a similar tone of deference.

Ekode closed his eyes and concentrated. He visualised the data

stream flowing to the lock mechanism – quintillions of binary

transmissions every second enveloped Ekode’s mind. He became

one with the data and twitched it ever so slightly.

The door to the Quav’lor HiveMind Chamber opened.

The image – the experience – faded and I felt the urge to loosen my collar. I would have done so had I not still been shackled to a death machine. The heads – the Kubthukians – all stared at me with the sort of contempt reserved for the deeply evil or the deeply stupid.

Now I knew what it felt like to be a politician.

‘These are the true events,’ the Head Head said. ‘Why is it not

reflected in your film?’

‘It’s not my film,’ I meekly stated. ‘I think you’ll find it’s

actually Karl Derniherzger’s.’

‘As director, Mr Derniherzger is deemed to be an accomplice

after the fact.’

‘Then I wish you were negotiating credit placement instead of the Writer’s Guild.’

‘This is, frankly, irrelevant,’ piped in another Kubthukian. ‘The film is inaccurate. The referent isn’t even present in the film.’

‘The Doctor?’ I exclaim. ‘I didn’t even know the guy existed

until today.’

‘That’s actually true.’ the Doctor said weakly. Being made to

project that light show seemed to have taken it out of him. ‘I tend to 7

offset my historical footprint to the point where my presence is hardly perceived at all.’

‘Poor source material is an invalid defence,’ the Head Head ruled.

‘I thought it might be,’ the Doctor muttered.

‘Why was General Irons there at all?’ asked another Kubthukian.

‘The record shows he wasn’t present’

There was a question I thought I could answer. ‘Irons was a

crucial figure in the final battle. He may not have actually been on the ship at the time, but it was good for the character to be there.’

This angered the Head Head. He thundered, ‘General. Irons is not a character. He is a real individual.’

A lesser head tried to keep the conversation going. ‘I would like to ask about Ekode.’

‘Yes.’ The Head Head shot me a dirty look. ‘What about Ekode?

That *fool* in your film is a very shallow parody of an honourable member of our Aesthetic. He has lost all nobility.’

I could see this was not going well, but I still thought I could explain. ‘We didn’t, well, know much about Ekode. And you have

to admit that without that psychospoor thingie you wouldn’t know.

A lot of his nobility is internalised and hard to show on film.’

The Kubthukians looked uniformly puzzled. ‘Internalised?’ one

asked.

The Doctor looked up from his slumped-over position in an

attempt to intercede. ‘Perhaps I can explain. It was Andrew Sarris who said it best when he determined that, unlike prose or even

theatre, film is a…’

The Doctor jerked back as all the power in the Eastern Seaboard

seemed to go through him.

'We will proceed to the second exhibit,' the Head Head ordered.

The HiveMind Chamber was even bigger than Charley had

imagined – and Charley prided herself on the breadth of her

imagination. The walls were at least 20 storeys high and lined with rows of glass caskets, each containing a hibernating Quav'lor

soldier. Charley's maths was a bit rusty from time and space travel, but she estimated there were at least 20,000 of them. The Doctor was doing what the Doctor did – playing with a mass of glass fibres under the operations console while talking to Sergeant Langley.

Strictly speaking, Sergeant Langley was actually maintaining his position while the Doctor was talking at him.

'... You see the genius of the Quav'lor isn't that they came up

with these stasis chambers that enable them to defer hibernating for six months at a time in favour of four hours or so. No, the real genius is that they've used the dormant psychic energy during this 8

hibernation cycle to create a HiveMind that controls the entire

fleet...'

Charley looked at the Doctor with the affection she renewed for

dotty relatives. 'Sergeant Langley left to check the entrance two minutes ago.'

The Doctor didn't look up from his work. 'Charley!' he

exclaimed with delight. 'Can you get Ekode? We're almost ready

and I might need him.'

Charley grunted and went over to Ekode. He was sitting cross-

legged, his large face in an expression of intense and yet serene concentration. She felt guilty disturbing him.

‘The Doctor needs me,’ Ekode said with a sigh.

‘If you please,’ Charley said, proffering her arm to help him up –

an offer he declined.

‘Humans don’t understand how our centre of gravity differs from

their own,’ he explained as he struggled to right himself.

‘If you don’t mind my asking…?’ Charley began.

‘We have a more concentrated bone density and we possess four

times the neck muscles of humans…’

‘No, no,’ Charley interrupted. ‘The Doctor explained that to me, as well as the way you can psychically interface with machines. No, I was wanting to ask why you seem so sad.’

A slight, understanding smile appeared and then vanished on his

face. ‘I am conflicted,’ he said with great weariness. ‘The Quav’lor have done great evil in the sector. They have destroyed worlds.

Enslaved thousands. My pairbond was among them.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Charley reached to clasp his hand and stopped,

remembering the Doctor had told her how the Kubthukians hated to be touched.

Ekode nodded at her expression of sympathy and continued.

‘They need to be stopped…but as a member of the Kubthukian

Aesthetic I believe aiding in their destruction is immoral.’

‘I’m sure the Doctor will do everything in his power to prevent

bloodshed,’ Charley said with all the confidence she could muster.

Ekode sighed. ‘You speak as one so young. Not so old as I. Or

the Doctor.’

They approached the Doctor, who stood holding in both hands a

vast number of strands of glass fibres from the operations console.

‘We’re ready,’ he said. He grabbed the fibres and concentrated.

The console lit up like Selfridges at Christmas. The Doctor spoke in a voice that commanded respect. ‘I wish to speak to the Quav’lor HiveMind.’

9

The Doctor’s head lolled forward in a way I didn’t think looked particularly healthy. My stomach was now making sure that the taste of grapefruit juice was being replaced with the taste of real bile. I had a feeling what was going to come next.

‘Show the clip,’ the Head Head demanded.

INT. HIVEMIND CHAMBER – NIGHT.

The HiveMind chamber is twenty storeys high, with seven tiers each packed with hundreds of QUAV’LOR WARRIORS, all pressed to the railings and wailing and shrieking as IRONS, DIEGO, the MARINES and BIG HEAD enter. BIG HEAD immediately dives behind IRONS covering his ears.

BIG HEAD: Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi

IRONS kicks BIG HEAD out of the way and ignores his chiftering, as he does the shrieking from the QUAV’LOR WARRIORS. He takes his machine gun and fires off a dozen rounds in the air. The shrieking temporarily stops.

IRONS: (at the top of his lungs) Are you listening? (noting the silence) Good. It’s time for the human race to be heard.

While they were showing the excerpt from the film, the

Kubthukians were alternately covering their ears – THX SurroundSound isn't obviously anatomically compatible with them – and their eyes every time Big Head came up. I looked to the Doctor anxiously.

'You made a big mistake,' the Doctor whispered to me. The Kubthukians are religious in their devotion to accuracy and fidelity to the truth. That's why they have me here to act as a referent. They don't take kindly to having their race reduced to a comedy part played by Chris Culkin-Rock.'

'How was I to know?' I stammered. 'Nobody knew anything about the Kubthukians. They broke diplomatic ties after the invasion. All I had to go on for any of this was heavily redacted military files.'

'And how much did you get?'

'Ten million and five points off the back end. It was my second picture.'

The Doctor nodded appreciatively. 'Not bad.'

The clip was over. Head Head called for order.

'The obvious question to ask is why Ekode's moral dilemma was missing from the scene,' one of the Kubthukians asked.

'It wasn't important,' I said. 'The scene intended to show the General's strength of resolve in getting the attention of the aliens in the hive.'

'Who are portrayed as 20-foot monsters,' grumbled a lesser head.

I shrugged. 'That's what the reports said.'

The Doctor perked his head up. ‘They did transmogrify into that shape in their attack on Pittsburgh.’

‘But only that one time,’ the lesser head countered.

‘But isn’t it important we see what they’re capable of?’ I asked.

The Head Head paused and then furrowed his considerable brow.

‘No.’

The Doctor spoke perhaps a little too dramatically for Ekode’s tastes. ‘I wish to speak to the Quav’lor HiveMind.’

The HiveMind voice was low and rumbling and seemed to come from every point in the Chamber. ‘YOU ARE SPEAKING TO THE HIVEMIND.’

‘On behalf of the humans and lesser species who occupy the planet Earth, I request you to stand down your forces immediately to begin peace talks.’

‘WHY SHOULD WE STAND DOWN OUR FORCES? THE HUMANS HAVE

DEMONSTRATED RESILIENCE AND INGENUITY, BUT THE FORMER CAN

BE WORN DOWN, AND THE LATTER CRUSHED.’

‘That’s your propaganda talking. That’s not a realistic threat assessment. The humans have already begun to rebel. They’ve retaken London, Johannesburg, Berlin and Ottawa. They will win Washington and Sydney in a matter of hours and from there it’s a series of dominoes: Moscow, Los Angeles, Dakar, Rio... all your major shunt points all closed down.’

‘IF THE SHUNT POINTS ARE TAKEN, WE HAVE DEFENSIVE MEASURES.’

‘Defensive measures?’

‘WE HAVE TRILETHIUM IMPLANTS WITHIN KEY VECTORS OF THE PLANET. WE WILL DETONATE THEM IF NECESSARY.’

Ekode shuddered at this revelation. He recalled what had happened when the Quav’lor detonated the Trilethium implants on Kubthuk Kraag Primus. He had lost his brother Doken in the conflagration.

Ekode looked at Charley, who was watching the Doctor with a mixture of awe and affection. The human female was so young. So full of hope.

He recalled the day he was inducted into the Aesthetic. How he was buried in the ashes from the funeral pyre of his second parent, Okile, and emerged from them reborn to dedicate his life to those values he held dear.

He recalled the day two Quav’lor soldiers dragged his pairbond, Kenob, away from him. He felt the pain of his memory and his values and his sense of right. He cursed the shifting sand that seemed to be the centre of his soul.

And, with that, he reached out and touched the Doctor’s hand. A single tear came down his enormous head as he concentrated and reached into the universe of data that was the Quav’lor ship.

The Doctor looked at Ekode, his face filled with shame and gratitude. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

The Doctor addressed the HiveMind. ‘There’s a reason you

refused to have the Kubthukians aboard your flagships. We have deactivated the implants and now have your fleet's self-destruct login.'

A klaxon wail sent Ekode wincing. The HiveMind was alarmed.

'THE OUTER PERIMETER IS BREACHED.'

Charley ran to the Doctor and flung her arms around him. 'The troops have arrived! The earth is saved!'

The Doctor visibly exhaled. 'It's only a matter of time now.'

I looked over to the Doctor beside me and felt as though I had just discovered that Santa Claus was real. I would have gladly offered milk and cookies and my Lakers season tickets in perpetuity for what he did for us that day. Only I realised what was about to happen to me.

The Head Head said, 'Let us see how this is put into the film.'

SCENE OMITTED.

Now everything was going to hit the fan.

'Why?' the Head Head sputtered.

'We were going to include it. But we decided...'

'You decided what?' The Head Head's already high-pitched voice was becoming audible only to dogs.

I had nothing else left except the truth. 'It wasn't relevant.'

'Not relevant!' the Head Head thundered. 'Ekode died a spiritual death when he betrayed himself and gave the Doctor the login. He now lives as an exile on Kubthuk Kroog Loor in total seclusion.'

'But the storming of the flagship and facing the HiveMind was just one part of the military's coordinated effort to reclaim the Earth. The story isn't with Ekode and his moral dilemma. The real story is with the military repelling the invaders.'

‘Why do you say ‘story’?’ the Head Head asks. ‘These events are

real. These things *happened*.’

‘They’re both real and a story,’ I try to explain. ‘There’s the real events. And there’s the fiction we make to tell others about the 12

events. They’re not the same thing.’

The Head Head stared at me in disbelief.

‘They *should* be the same,’ he said, his face scrunched up like a five-year-old when faced with the reality it’s mum and not the

Tooth Fairy putting money under the pillow in exchange for molars.

‘They *must* be the same.’

The Doctor shook his head sadly. ‘Postmodernism is *totally* lost on this race.’

There was a moment of expectant silence. Then the Head Head

said, ‘We are prepared to pronounce judgment.’

‘Wait!’ called someone from the back of the room. I couldn’t see whoever said it from my shackled perspective, but I recognised the voice. It was the attractive woman the Doctor travelled with. The petite girl with the flapper-bobbed hair and gingham dress.

‘Charley!’ The Doctor was overjoyed.

‘This intrusion is unwarranted,’ the Head Head yelled.

‘Begging your forgiveness,’ Charley said breathlessly, ‘but there is something important you may want to consider.’ Charley came to the Head Head and handed him a manila envelope. The other

Kubthukians converged around him as he opened it up.

The Head Head read the letterhead. ‘Creatron Artisans and Artists Associates.’

‘CAAA!’ said another Kubthukian excitedly.

‘They wish to option our story for a film!’

‘A three-picture deal!’

‘Credited as creative consultants!’

‘Six points off the back end.’

‘Gross or net?’

‘Gross!’

The Head Head looked out at us, wincing.

‘We must discuss this privately.’

He pressed a button on the terminal in front of him and the

Kubthukians disappeared in a flash. With that, my restraints were released. The Doctor’s were too.

Charley helped the Doctor stand up. ‘You know, I haven’t been

electrocuted in a chair since that time I was executed in Alcatraz for a crime I didn’t commit,’ he told her.

I was still considering why I was still alive.

The Doctor saw the puzzlement on my face. ‘The Kubthukians

are as fanatical about the pursuit of profit as they are the pursuit of truth.’

‘Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?’ I asked.

The Doctor nodded. ‘I suspect this deal will give them enough

inner turmoil to keep the Aesthetic going for the next decade.’ He 13

turned to Charley. ‘You must have had a bit of an adventure getting CAAA to agree.’

‘Getting in took some doing, but once I was there they were

desperate to have exclusive rights to the Kubthukians,’ Charley

explained. ‘I only have one question.’

‘What’s that?’ the Doctor asked.

‘What does “six points off the back end” mean?’

The Doctor offered to show me where the transmat was. As we

made our way down the corridor the Doctor admitted, ‘You know, I actually liked the film. The authenticity – well, you have to switch your brain off – but I thought the special effects were great and I liked the romance between Diego and Irons.’

I found myself blushing for the first time since I was 14 at the high school dance getting my lips caught in Jennie Obermann’s

braces. ‘I was proud of that bit, too,’ I said.

The Doctor stopped and turned to me. ‘You know, the

Kubthukians were partially right. Even with what little you knew, you could have done something with Ekode’s story even in that

film.’

I nodded. ‘Maybe I’ll give it another try.’

‘You should.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘Just one thing.’

‘What?’

The Doctor looked around to see if anyone was looking and then

leant toward me and spoke in hushed tones.

‘Could you maybe get Jude Law the Third to play me?’

Policy to Invade

Ian Mond

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

X'lau (Maintenance Operator, Planetary Conversions): Yep, I was the operator who was rostered on that day to deal with the

oxygen treatment. How could I know it would mean we'd all lose

our jobs?

Department of Auditing and Accountability

AUD/9887654DH2

BRIEFING FOR: *Maxwell Maximillian* (CHIEF AUDITOR) **AUDIT OF PLANETARY CONVERSIONS**

PURPOSE

1. To provide the Chief Auditor with an account of Planetary

Conversions' involvement with freelance agent the Doctor'.

ATTACHMENT 1:

Calendar Entry

Thursday 11 October 3994

Meeting

Subject: Discussion with the Doctor re: Trycos 3

Time (Starts): 13:30

Time (Ends): 14:45

Required to attend:

Peter Ruff (CEO)

Michael O'Regan (Director of Strategy)

Melissa Paton (Director of Planetary Pacification)

Jasper Clomes (Managing Director of Contracts & Procurement) 15

Fred (Professional Hitman): I don't care about your precious paperwork. Use my real name and our deal is null and void.

Michael Haines (Team Leader, Strategic Initiatives, Planetary Conversions): Yes, I wrote a position paper, Pm not denying that.

But mine quoted ten different case studies, highlighting the

Doctor's involvement in each of them. I illustrated, unequivocally, how the Doctor takes companies like Planetary Conversions and

runs them out of business.

Rachel Lane (Executive Secretary, Office of the CEO, Planetary Conversions): When Peter Ruff, the CEO, asked me to organise a meeting with himself, a number of high-level managers, and a client called the Doctor, I think I nearly fell off my chair. I mean, there was no way possible it could be the same Doctor I'd had breakfast with a few weeks before. Could it?

Tony Mitchell (Lead Chemist, Pacification Development,

Planetary Conversion): The moment I smelt them roses I knew they were gassing us with Bizo. But I was seeing stars before I

could tell anyone.

Michael Haines: Have you ever heard of Basilisk Inc? Yes, that's right, a few years back they were this sector's major arms dealers, supplying everything from high-velocity blaster cannons, to Grade 8 planet busters. And then they crossed paths with the Doctor and now... I think the CEO sells gourmet burgers on Darius Prime.

Rachel Lane: Just as the meeting is about to begin, the windows surrounding Peter's office go black – something he only does if he's meeting someone really important. Then, from inside his office, I hear this groaning sound and I know the Doctor's just arrived in that magical blue box of his. And in that moment, all I want to do is rush into Peter's office and thank the Doctor and hug him and tell him I'll never, ever forget that first mouthful of poached eggs, salmon and hollandaise sauce.

Tony Mitchell: The roses? Yeah that was my touch. Look, I always wanted Bizo to have a nice smell and roses reminded me of good

times with my mum back in New Melbourne and that garden of hers

she loved so much. Goddess... I miss her.

Anyway, the higher-ups knocked the idea on the head. Not that I

was surprised or anything – those muppets never spent an extra cent if they didn't have to. But, when the Doc and I were cooking up the compound, I thought I might add it in. The Doc was more then

happy to go along with it and he said he was willing to take the 16

blame if the muppets kicked up a storm. That Doc was a cool dude.

Michael Haines: And I'm sure you've heard of Hulbert Logistics, or the Morton Group, or Maynards. Three companies that dealt

specifically with invasion outsourcing and resource management–

our prime business. All three of them now defunct because of their dealings with the Doctor. Do you see where I'm going with this?

Fred: I still find it hard to believe that Peter Ruff actually gave you my name and contact details. I thought he was smarter than that

Obviously, a man who doesn't treasure his own existence.

Department of Auditing and Accountability

AUDIT OF PLANETARY CONVERSIONS

BACKGROUND – PLANETARY CONVERSIONS

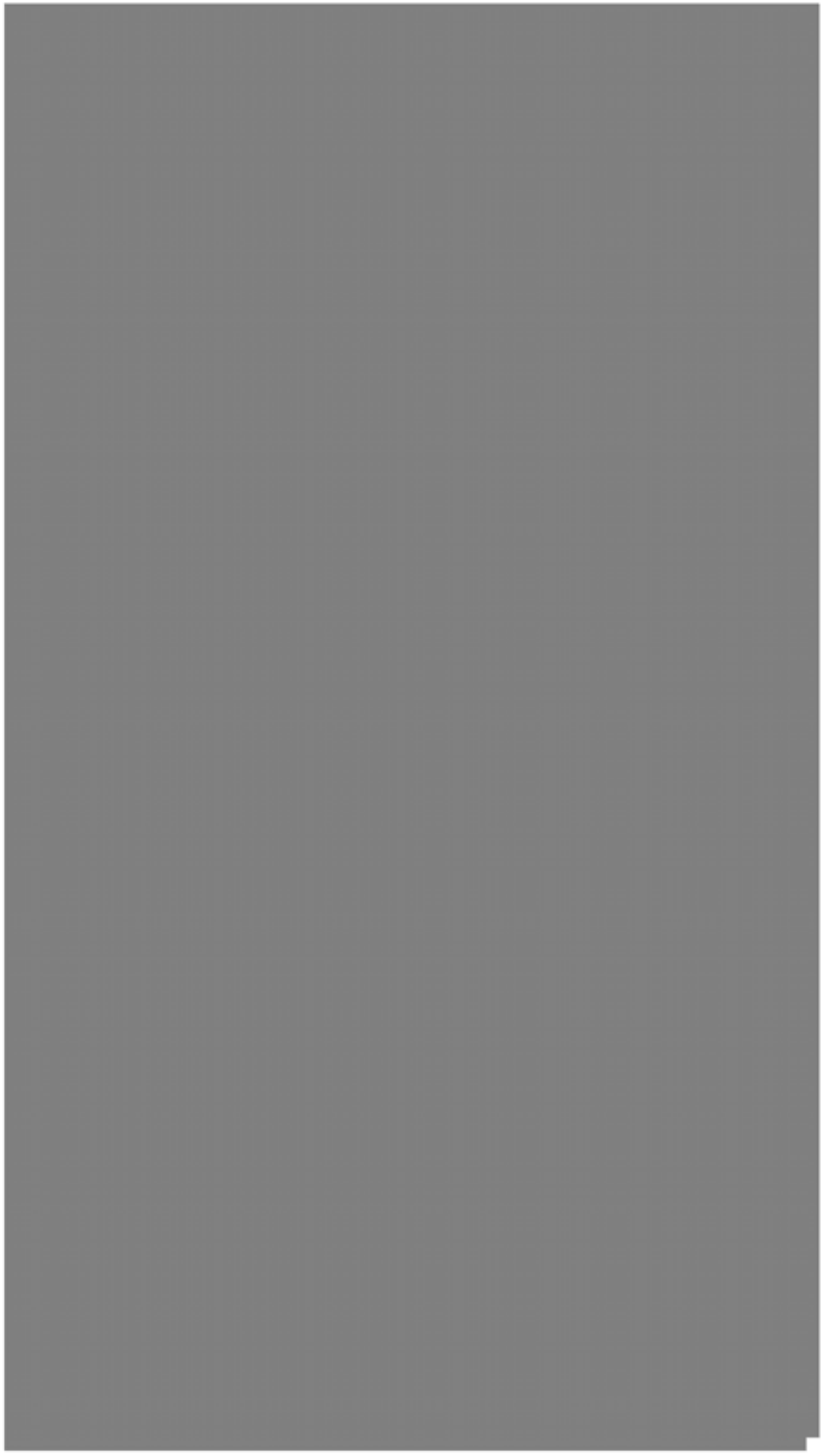
2. Planetary Conversions was formed in 3958 by Peter Ruff and Arthur Baxter (now deceased). As with other organisations of its type, such as Hulbert Logistics (now defunct) and Maynards (now defunct), Planetary Conversions specialises in the outsourcing of planetary invasions. Unlike its competitors, however, Planetary Conversions guarantees a near-bloodless revolution.

3. According to Planetary Conversions' accountants, Williams and Dix, over the last 500 campaigns, the Company has averaged a casualty rate of 24.3 people (please see attached report). This is well within the accepted Galactic Federation determination for a bloodless revolution of so to too individuals (*The Galactic Federation Charter (Planetary Invasions) 3989*, Section A, Schedules 4 and 5).

4. Planetary Conversions' client base stems predominantly from dispossessed rulers who have the capital but not the manpower to invade a planet. While the client is usually not averse to bloodshed, the reduction in casualties facilitates an easier transition into power. Further, with the introduction of chemicals such as Bizopiptrene and Pentothane, the client has the capacity to both pacify and 'modify' the personality

of the populace to suit his needs.

5. As per Part 4 of *The Galactic Federation Charter*, organisations of this type are required to be audited on a half-yearly basis.



ATTACHMENT 2:

POLICY POSITION PAPER 14 OCTOBER 3994

TO: Peter

Ruff

Michael O'Regan

Melinda Paton

Jasper Clomes

FROM: Michael Haines

YOUR REF: 102SJ

BUSINESS AREA: Strategic Initiatives

FILE NO: TM53-10-INV

CONTACT NAME: Michael Haines

EXT: 1830

SUBJECT: Pacification of Trycos 3

The Background:

Trycos 3 is a Class 4 Planet in the Serenti Cluster. The planet has four major landmasses and an approximate population of 2;4 billion people (though as attachment A indicates, this figure is constantly falling). The eruption of a world war, more then fifty years ago, has seen Trycos 3 experience a massive social, economic and technological decline. This has led to the disbanding of the government across all four landmasses and the formation of over six thousand competing clans, each one fighting for dominant rule of the planet. It is predicted that in ten years the population will number less than 5,000

individuals.

The Client:

Little about the Doctor is actually known. According to the meeting held in the Chief Executive Officer's office on 11 October 3994, he came to us because:

1. ‘Trycos 3 is in a state of total anarchy. There’s no dictatorial government, no brutal police force, no megalomaniacal dictator. I’ve got no one to overthrow’;

2. ‘I can’t bear to see these poor people wipe themselves out’; and 3. ‘I’ve read all the brochures and you’re the only organisation who promises to keep the bloodshed to a minimum’.

Resources:

As indicated by the Doctor, Trycos 3 is a planet rich in natural resources. An orbital, quantum survey conducted by Research and Acquisitions has uncovered a number of rare minerals, including:

• 13%

Gold

• 1.5%

Galastron

• 0.9%

Dexterium

But more importantly, the probe detected a sizeable load of Jethrik (2.2%) on the northern side of the planet. Based on current market values, this amount of Jethrik would be worth in excess of 450 trillion credits

The Contract:

As per the conditions and clauses of the contract, we will:

•

Pacify Trycos 3;

•

Re-educate the populace; and

•

Establish a World Government, with specific focus on

infrastructure and social welfare.

In payment, we will be provided with mining rights over 75% of the planet's north pole in perpetuity. The contract is due to commence on 31 October 3994.

The Recommendation:

That the contract is signed.

Fred (Professional Hitman): Planetary Conversions – or should I say Peter, I only dealt with Peter – contacted me because they knew my reputation. I would show you my impressive record as proof,

but I'd rather not incriminate myself more then I need to.

Rachel Lane (Executive Secretary, Office of the CEO Planetary Conversions): For many years, my husband and I would spend every Sunday eating brunch. We travelled far and wide – as far as the Tanadata Cluster – to find the best synthetic poached eggs and cappuccino. Philip, my husband, he loved bacon and sausages and

poachies (that's what he called them) and toast with butter. Me, I loved Eggs Atlantic: poached eggs with smoked salmon and

hollandaise sauce on two toasted muffins.

We ate at some amazing places. Places where you'd have been

fooled into think that the food was actually real. Places where the poached eggs were just the right side of runny, and the hollandaise was never too vinegary and the muffins were soft and the smoked

salmon was fresh and not too fishy. Sunday morning soon became

my favourite time of the week.

Michael Haines (Team Leader, Strategic Initiatives,

PlanetaryConversions): I want to make it crystal clear that I did not write the version of the policy paper that was presented to the CEO. Yes, I'm aware that it's signed by me and has my encryption code, but that doesn't mean it wasn't modified. As I've been trying to explain, *my* paper quoted case studies. More than that, *my* recommendation was that we keep well away from the Doctor.

Tony Mitchell (Lead Chemist, Pacification Development,

Planetary Conversion): Yeah, my life before PC was a bit on the shady side. I dabbled in... Well, let's just say that my clientele didn't wear suits and nice shoes. I've got no idea how PC heard

about me, but I bet it was through one of my mules. One of the

muppets probably had a taste of the merchandise, realised the

quality, and thought to himself that I was wasting my talents in the back alleys of New Melbourne. After they hired me, the first thing they got me doing was work on a new pacification drug. I was

dealing with a bunch of chemists, the sort who had degrees and

wore good suits and nice shoes and who probably never had to mix a compound in a hurry because they had a customer, armed to the

teeth, waiting for his delivery. I'm not saying those others chemists didn't have the smarts or the talents. I'm just saying that I was the first to come up with Bizopiptrene – Bizo for short.

Rachel Lane: Philip died six years ago from a mutated form of pancreatic cancer. He was only the eighth person to die from the cancer in over 500 years. The day he died was the day I stopped

going out for brunch on a Sunday. It wasn't the same without

Philip. Watching him delight in the food, listening to him evaluate the quality of the bacon, kissing the synthetic grease off his lips when we'd left the café. Not the same at all.

Michael Haines: Planetary Conversions introduced the encryption key system as a security measure. Each person who works here,

from the CEO to the Maintenance Officer, has a personalised key. It can't be hacked.

Tony Mitchell: Bizo is basically a muscle relaxant and it's been around for ages. But the Feds banned it years ago because of how it sometimes relaxed people a bit too much. Those in the business

called it Zombie. It was a chemical I knew real well. So, I played around with the compound, mostly cutting out that part that made people drool. When I was done, Bizo was more then just a relaxant.

Give it to someone and they'd be so relaxed they'd do anything

you'd tell them to do.

Rachel Lane: One Sunday, a few weeks before the meeting, this man arrives at my front door. I was immediately struck by how sad and tired he looked. His linen suit was all creased and stained with mud, and his umbrella had been torn apart, black tatters hanging off the frame. He introduced himself as the Doctor and asked me if I had any plans for breakfast.

Michael Haines: The key provides a paper trail, keeping people accountable for the work they've done. The key is tagged against anything you write, edit or sign. In an age where identity theft is rife, it's meant to offer confirmation as to who wrote and signed off on the paper. Of course, it's a well-known secret that top-level 20

management has access to a master key that allows them to edit

papers without their key being tagged to the document. Do you

understand what I'm saying here? My key might be the only one

tagged to that position paper, but I wasn't the one who wrote that document.

Fred: Peter gave me the details and told me how he wanted the target dealt with – a shot to the heart. Peter also asked for an explosion to

accompany the kill-shot, something that would bury

the body in rubble. When I pointed out to Peter that an explosion of that size would kill lots of other people... Well let's just say he wasn't in a caring mood that day.

Department of Auditing and Accountability

AUDIT OF PLANETARY CONVERSIONS

BACKGROUND – THE DOCTOR

6. Very little is known about the Doctor, including his real

name or his place of residence. Michael Haines has stated

that the Doctor is a Time Lord. Further, anecdotal evidence

from Ms Lane indicates that she travelled with the Doctor

into Earth's past, circa the 21st century. While the possibility of time travel cannot be discounted, there has never been

evidence of a Time Lord race or of their home planet

Gallifrey (refer to the report, *The Myths of Kasterborous:*

From the Sisterhood to the Lords of Time). Consequently, it is difficult to support the view that the Doctor is a Time

Lord.

7. As Michael Haines's policy paper illustrates, the Doctor

approached Planetary Conversions in the hope that they

might have the resources to aid the populace of Trycos 3

(please refer to **Attachment 2**). Therefore, unlike the bulk of Planetary Conversions' client base, the Doctor aims were

purely philanthropic.

8. From 1 November 3994 to 12 December 3994, the Doctor

assisted Planetary Conversions in the pacification of Trycos

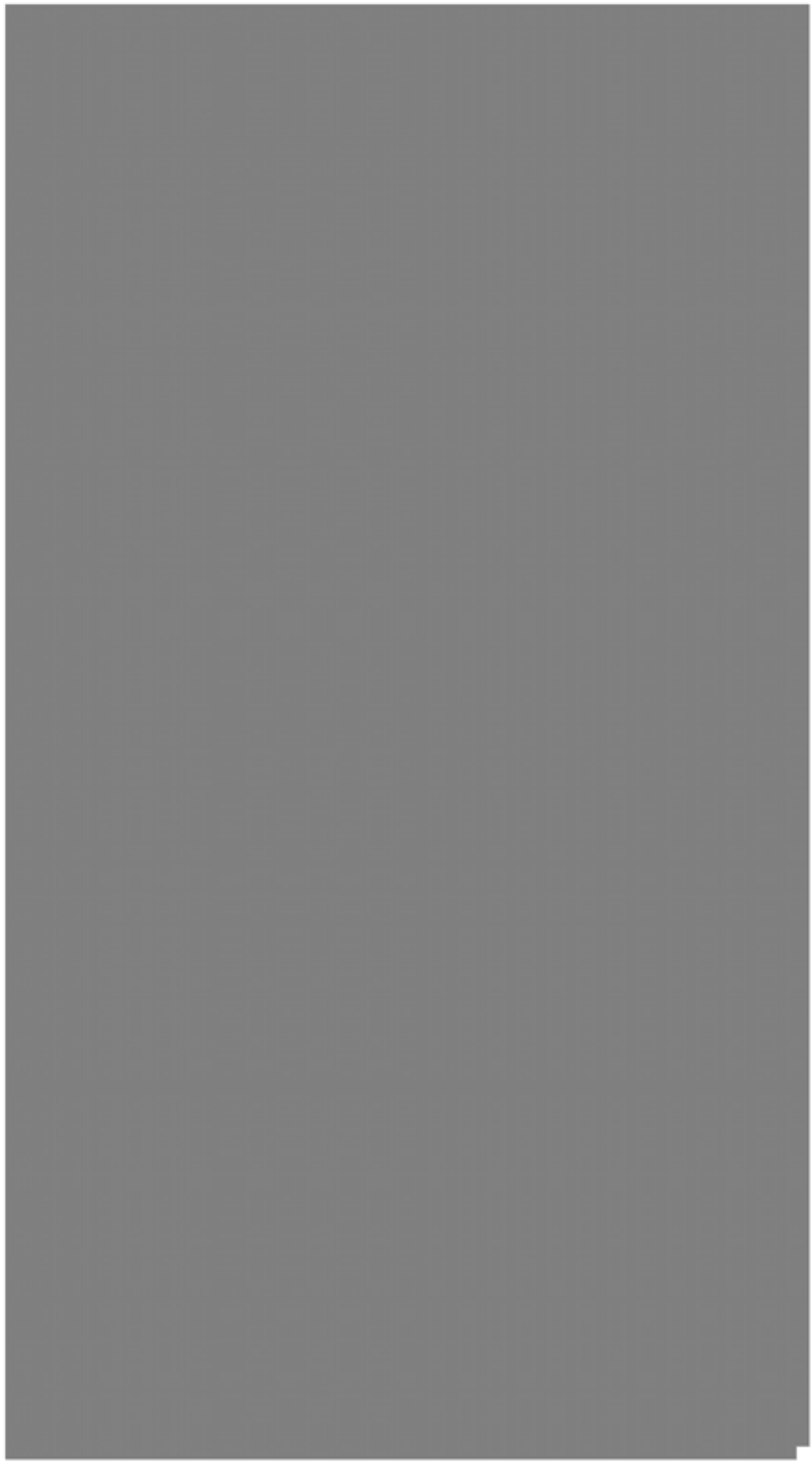
3. Specifically, he:

a) Helped modify the pacification compound used on the populace;

b) Provided re-education for the pacified populace; and

c) Developed a social welfare-based model of World Government for the populace.

21



ATTACHMENT 3:

UPDATE REPORT

From: Roger Steed – Trycos 3 Project Manager

To: The Corporate Management Group (CMG)

PURPOSE:

1. To provide the CMG with an update on the pacification and mining of Trycos 3.

BACKGROUND:

2. As per the contract with the Doctor, pacification of Trycos 3 commenced on 30 October 3994.

PACIFICATION – RESULTS:

3. With the Doctor's assistance, modification work was done on the pacification treatment used on the populace of Trycos 3. Specifically, the anaesthetic component of the treatment was refined to cause the least amount of neural damage. Further, an adapted version of Bizopiptrene was included to facilitate re-education of the populace.

4. It took approximately three days to complete the initial stage of the pacification process. This included low-level bombardment of the entire planet. At this phase of the pacification, we expect a small loss of life either due to the bombardment or heart failure caused by the treatment.

Significantly, not a single life was lost.

5. Once saturation had been reached, automatons were sent to the surface to individually pacify those who were not affected by the initial barrage. This process took a further three weeks, with 543,098 citizens pacified in the process (see attached report).

6. It should be noted that the six deaths reportedly occurred here.

Unfortunately, this was as a result of the automatons defending themselves.

Although non-kill shots were applied, it appears that the individuals ceased their own lives, rather than be 'taken prisoner'.

7. Re-education of the planet is currently two-thirds complete. A recent report (attached) indicates that those pacifi1d are exhibiting a higher level of brain function, with violent impulses reduced to a minimum. Further, those who have been re-educated and have awoken from the induced coma are acting in a civilised and proper manner (as defined by the Highsborough Report).

MINING – RESULTS:

8. Initial quantum studies indicated that the northern side of the planet had a sizeable deposit of Jethrik (see attached report).

9. However, an hi-depth analysis of the planet surface has shown that Jethrik is not localised to the northern side. Deposits of the mineral have been found across the planet. As indicated in the attached mining report, Jethrik comprises over 10% of the planet's total surface. This would make Trycos 3 the largest source of Jethrik in the universe.

10. Further, it would appear that the greatest concentration of the Jethrik is across the southern and eastern poles of the planet. Unfortunately, as per the contract arrangement, we are not permitted to mine these sectors of Trycos 3.

RECOMMENDATION:

11. That CMG note the above report.

Fred (Professional Hitman): When I take a job, I expect full disclosure. I mean, what's the point in hiring me if you're not going to tell me everything I need to know about the target. And yes, that

includes knowing the target is a Time Lord.

Michael Haines (Team Leader, Strategic lnitiatives, Planetary Conversions): We'd all heard about the mining report. A whole department of quantity surveyors were dismissed for getting the

analysis wrong. All that Jethrik and, because of their contract with the Doctor, Planetary Conversions could only get their hands on a small portion of it.

Rachel Lane (Executive Secretary, Office of the CEO, Planetary Conversions): You could ask me that question a hundred times, and I think I'd give you a hundred different answers. I mean, I'm not the type of woman who walks off with the first stranger who

asks her to breakfast. Since Philip's death I've liked spending time only with myself. Not that I have that much free time. Peter works me so hard, getting his food, setting up his meetings and sometimes writing and editing his letters. What I'm trying to tell you is that my normal reaction would have been to slam the door in his face. But something about the Doctor... he immediately made me feel

comfortable. So I simply said yes.

Tony Mitchell (Lead Chemist, Pacification Development,

Planetary Conversions): Yeah, I was cheesed off when they told me I'd be working with the Doc. I am a guy who likes space when

I'm doing my thing. And anyway, clients don't know the first thing about compounds, all they're gonna do is stuff things up. But the Doc, he was someone special. He comes into my lab all smiles,

shaking my hand like it's a pump and telling me he knows all about my work. I thought the guy had totally lost the plot... and then he starts going on about a bunch of drugs I'd worked on, and he knows his stuff. Then he starts on about Bizo, talks about how good he thought it was, how smart I'd been to reduce the zombie side effect and how together the two of us are gonna make it so much better.

And I'm hanging off his every word.

Michael Haines: Look, the Jethrik isn't important. You've interviewed Ruff and the rest of Management, so you know how

they planned to break the contract with the Doctor. They made up some rubbish about him being the leader of a rebel movement on

Trycos 3. And you know they contracted a professional killer to

have the Doctor removed once and for all. What you should be

asking me is how the entire staff of Planetary Conversions was

gassed with Bizopiptrene a week after the Doctor's supposed death.

Rachel Lane: I was expecting a skimmer outside the house.

Instead, he led me to a blue police box. I'm guessing from the

expression on your face you're not going to believe me when I tell you the box was actually a time-travel machine, complete with

cathedrals and gothic arches. As strange as the experience was, I never freaked out Again, it was something about the Doctor,

something about the way he kept talking, the way he kept meeting my eyes, the way be kept smiling like this was all perfectly normal.

And then, before I knew it, I was standing in a gorgeous restaurant, with wood panelling, theatrical chairs and solid wood tables, filled with patrons all talking and laughing. I noticed that they were eating toast, bacon, cereal and eggs. The Doctor smiled and said, 'It's wonderful, isn't it?'

Tony Mitchell: I've never worked with someone as brilliant as the Doc. I should have hated being his assistant, following his orders.

But, mate, he knew ways of playing with chemicals that I'd never seen before. He kept on twisting and turning that Rim, making it play his jazzy tune. The Bizo he cooked up not only didn't have

zombie side effects, but it actually helped people learn stuff quicker.

All I did was make sure it smelt like roses.

Fred: Maybe you've got no evidence, but I believe in Time Lords.

I've been around and I've seen things and I know there are species out there that can do your head in. One thing my mentor taught me when I started out in the job is that you don't mess around with anyone who can stick you in a time loop or make you cease to exist.

So, there's no way I would have taken on the contract if I'd known what the Doctor was.

Department of Auditing and Accountability

AUDIT OF PLANETARY CONVERSIONS

DISCUSSION – THE DOCTOR AS DISSIDENT

9. It is evident that the discovery of Jethrik on the eastern and southern poles of Trycos 3, led to Planetary Conversions'

decision to kill the Doctor. Legally, to gain rights over the Jethrik, the Doctor would either have to break the contract, or perform an action in contravention of the contract.

10. As a result, Planetary Conversions took the latter approach. They began a negative campaign, characterising the Doctor as a dissident. This involved spreading rumours amongst the staff of the Doctor's actions and a report sent to the CMG on 4 December 3394 stating that the terrorist group

had grown to over 5,000 members and had destroyed a number of automatons (see Attachment 5).

11. It should be noted that the Doctor was on Trycos 3 at the time the so-called terrorist acts occurred. However, video evidence retrieved from the Mark IV automata shows the Doctor attempting to educate those who had recently been pacified. This is at odds with the statement released by Planetary Conversions (refer to Attachment 7).

ATTACHMENT 4:

MEMO

From: Marcus Lyle (Property Manager)

To: Samantha Fisher (Team Leader, Maintenance)

Sam,

Management have signed off on a new oxygen treatment for the ventilator system. Apparently, it reduces stress and anxiety by 15%, which, considering we've got an audit tomorrow, probably isn't a bad thing.

Can you do me a favour and make sure X'lau or M'tao, or whoever's on roster this week, knows about the treatment. It's a bit different to what they're used to and I don't want them putting everyone to sleep.

Thanks Sam,

Marcus

Fred (Professional Hitman): I decided on a neutron blaster. It's a precision weapon that ruptures internal organs, but doesn't leave a mark on the flesh. Even under autopsy it's hard to tell the person's been shot. I can't tell you how many coroners have mistaken my work for a huge heart attack.

Rachel Lane (Executive Secretary, Office of the CEO, Planetary Conversions): We were shown a table for two near the kitchen.

Immediately I was struck by the well-organised chaos of the

kitchen, the shouting of orders, the clatter of pots, the sizzle of fried food. And I realised that this wasn't synthetic cooking, that the food

being prepared in the kitchen was real. I think the Doctor saw the stunned look on my face, because he poured me a glass of water,

and with a gentle voice said that this was his favourite place to eat breakfast. He told me that we were on Earth, in the 21st century, and that the European – that was the name of the restaurant – made the best Eggs Atlantic in the universe. I couldn't help but think of Philip. And before I could stop myself, I was crying.

Michael Haines (Team Leader, Strategic Initiatives, Planetary Conversions): Look, you keep asking the wrong questions. They thought they'd killed the Doctor, but he survived. And I can't

imagine he was happy with the way he'd been treated. No! I don't have proof he survived. How can I have proof? But don't you see?

He used the master key to forge orders. He ordered the release of Bizopiptrene into the offices of Planetary Conversions.

For Goddess sakes, it wasn't an administrative error. It was him!

It was the Doctor! The only reason Peter Ruff and the rest of CMG

is going to jail for a long time is because they told you everything.

Think about that for a moment. All the files, all the policy papers, all the letters, all the memorandums of understanding and all the emails are clear of any illegality. Aren't they? And yet Peter Ruff sat here and told you everything. In fact he would have done anything for you, you know... danced a little jig, cooked you dinner, written you a novel... anything! All of us would. We were all gassed!

Oh and one more thing. Don't you think it's a coincidence that

you guys are tipped off about all this on the same day as the

'administrative error'?

Tony Mitchell (Lead Chemist, Pacification Development,

Planetary Conversions): Trust me when I tell you that we'd used up

all the Bizo during the pacification of Trycos 3. And the only person who knew how to make that compound was the Doc. All I

could do was make it smell nice.

Rachel Lane: A waitress emerged, asking if we'd like coffee. As the Doctor ordered a cup of sweet tea, I took a moment to gather myself and wipe away the tears. I then ordered a cappuccino. The waitress handed both of us a menu, but we knew what we wanted

without looking. The Doctor asked for a continental breakfast of toast, brioche, croissants and assorted condiments. For me... well, I couldn't go past the Eggs Atlantic, could I?

Michael Haines: The master key isn't a piece of software. My information tells me it's an algorithm, a long string of numbers and letters that needs to be inputted before you start editing a document.

I trawled through the systems for years looking for the thing and came up empty. But I've heard rumours... rumours that hint that the master key might be... well... organic. That the key is stored in a place where no one can find it – implanted, through cognitive

hypnosis, into the mind of one of his employees, you know, one of us. And I bet that person wouldn't even know it was there. It would be just like Peter to use innocent people to hide his secrets.

Rachel Lane: As we waited for our food, the Doctor and I had a good chat. We started with small talk, the weather, my boring job, the decor of the European, and before I knew it I was telling him about Philip and how much I missed him. As the words came

pouring out, I realised I'd never spoken to anyone about Philip. I'd sort of kept the memory of him to myself, and I suppose that was wrong of me. And the Doctor, he was such a good listener. He

nodded at all the right places, and comforted me when it looked like I was going to burst into tears again. As good as the food turned out to be, speaking to the Doctor about Philip, and how much I missed him, and how much I loved him and how much he meant to me...

well the breakfast was worth it just for that.

Michael Haines: Look, why don't you ask Peter Ruff about the master

key, and he'll confirm it exists. He'll tell you where it's located.

OK... so inject some Bizopiptrene into his system and he'll have no choice, he'll be forced to tell you whose head it's in.

Not ethical! Listen to me, for Goddess sakes, LISTEN! Peter Ruff and his management stooges were willing to enslave an entire race to mine Jethrik for them. Did he tell you that? Did he tell you they were drafting a policy paper on how much it would cost to

administer the slave force? DID HE!?

No! I refuse... *refuse*... REFUSE to calm down. I didn't write that policy position paper, I didn't recommend that we work with the

Doctor, I had nothing, nothing, to do with this. Why... why won't you believe me?

Rachel Lane: And the food came... and oh my Goddess it was so sublime. Look, I took a photo of it with my phone... come on... I've still got it stored... take a look at that. Isn't that the nicest Eggs Atlantic you've ever, ever seen? You look at that and you know

I've travelled back in time. Those perfect sized muffins, delicately toasted, with two thin slices of Tom Cooper salmon (well, that's what they called it on the menu) and two beautifully poached eggs –

my Goddess, the poachies were good – and finally the creamy

hollandaise sauce, not too vinegary, which complemented the meal.

With the Doctor urging me on, I cut into the muffin and the

salmon and the poached eggs, the yolk running across the plate.

And I ever so slowly brought the food to my mouth... not wanting to be disappointed... because I knew the taste couldn't possibly match what I imagined in my head. And then... well, I'll never forget how amazing it tasted.

I remember looking at the Doctor and seeing his smile and

feeling comforted by that. The rest of it's a bit of a blur. I mean, I remember savouring each and every bite. But I was so engrossed in my Eggs Atlantic that the next thing I know, it's taken me an hour to

eat the meal – which is snail's pace when you consider it usually took Philip and me fifteen minutes to eat our breakfasts. It's funny, actually, because the same sort of thing happens to me at work all the time.

Fred: I was positioned perfectly for the kill shot, on top of a ridge with an excellent sight line of the target. He was working with a group of pacified adults, amongst the rubble of Trycos 3. I focused on his jumper, just above the right breastbone. And then I pulled the trigger. I know the shot hit the target. Just before the entire area exploded, I saw the target go down. As far as I was concerned, he was dead. But you see, they never told me he was a Time Lord. And everyone knows that a Time Lord has two hearts.

Department of Auditing and Accountability

AUDIT OF PLANETARY CONVERSIONS

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

12. As you are aware, high levels of Bizopiptrene were

detected in the staff on the day of the audit. As a result, Peter Ruff, the Chief Executive of Planetary Conversions, and

members of his staffwere compelled to tell us the truth about

the company's operation on Trycos 3. It should be noted,

however, that documentation retrieved indicates that the

decision to pump Bizopiptrene into the ventilation system

was an administrative error on the part of Property

Management. There is no evidence at all of the Doctor's

involvement.

13. Further, there is no evidence of the existence of a 'master

key' as purported by the Team Leader, Mr Haines. Analysis

was sought from the Techno Auditors, who concluded that

the encryption key employed by Planetary Conversions could

not be overridden. While this is at odds with Mr Haines

claim, there is no reason to doubt the Techno Auditor's

analysis. Further, Mr Haines belief that the key is located in

the mind of a co-worker cannot be verified without extensive

psychoanalysis on each and every staff member. This is not a

practical option.

14. Moreover, contrary to Mr Haines's protestations, there is

no evidence to suggest that his policy paper was edited by

either Peter Ruff or a member of CMG.

15. It is unclear why the Doctor would have taken Ms Lane

to Earth, in the 21st century, for breakfast. It is thought that perhaps the Doctor was interrogating her for information.

However Ms Lane is adamant that the Doctor did not

specifically solicit information about Planetary Conversions.

16. Based on the statements made by [Fred] it is not clear

whether the Doctor survived the attempt on his life.

However, it should be noted that the Doctor's remains were

never found.

Fred: I wouldn't be surprised if he survived the kill-shot and the explosion. Still, either way there's no way I'm marking it down as a miss. I wasn't told the whole truth, was I?

Tony Mitchell: Would you believe it, I work for a posh drug company now. Hey you guys should check them out You think PC

were bad, mate, the dodgy things [name withheld] ask me to do...

lets just say that it takes me back to the good old days.

Michael Haines: I warned them. I told them that if they weren't careful, he would take them down. But they saw the Jethrik and

they saw the money and the power and they used their damn master key and changed my paper and my recommendation. So now, you

can add Planetary Conversions to the list of companies the Doctor's liquidated.

Rachel Lane: No, I have no idea why he took me out for breakfast.

I try not to ask myself the question, you see. I know he wanted

something from me... I could tell by the way he sometimes looked at me. And maybe, by having breakfast with him I gave him what

he wanted. But he gave me so much more. The most wonderful

breakfast I've ever had and the ability to deal with Philip's death.

And best of all, I've started going out for brunch on Sundays again.

29

Department of Auditing and Accountability

AUDIT OF PLANETARY

CONVERSIONS RECOMMENDATION

17. That the Chief Auditor notes the above.

X'lau (Maintenance Operator, Planetary Conversions): Me?

Yeah, I found myself a job on Darius Prime selling gourmet

burgers. The boss thinks he's running a multi-billion-dollar

corporation, but hey, work is work.

30

Only Connect

Andy Lane

An adventure of the Fourth Doctor

James Willaker knew something was wrong when the taxi driver

took him to a road that didn't exist

It was his own fault. Later, in that brief period between his world being broken into pieces and then returning to normal again, he took some measure of comfort in that. The driver had made an honest

mistake: Willaker had given him the wrong street name, the name

of a street that hadn't been built yet, and the driver, assuming Willaker knew what he was talking about, took him there. It was

that simple.

It was dark when he left the office: dark and raining. He'd been working overtime, poring over a high-definition computer screen, pulling up maps of the new Greenfen housing development and

checking the cobweb-like overlays of sewage and water pipes,

electrical conduits and fibre-optic cables. Deconflicting the various elements of the development was a major headache, especially since the entire thing was going to be built on reclaimed marshland near the river and the surveyors couldn't guarantee the stability of the ground for anything more than five years. He'd spent most of the day rotating the three-dimensional view, peering at it from various angles and dragging the lines around, trying to ensure no element came within two metres of another. Not that it mattered: the

builders would put things where they damn well wanted to

regardless of whatever plans they were given. Sometimes Willaker wondered what his function actually was in the firm. Nothing ever got built according to the plans he drew up. Just like bus timetables gave bus companies a reason to be late, he suspected his plans were a blueprint for how a housing development should have been built.

He'd been vaguely aware of his colleagues turning their

computers off, locking their in, out and pending trays away in their cupboards, putting their coats on and bidding each other goodnight, but it had been something in the background, like telephones

ringing in real life filtering into the dreams of a sleeping mind. He 31

was absorbed into a vision of multicoloured lines weaving together to

form the skeleton of a new town. By the time he woke up and looked around, the room was empty and his finger ached with the strain of holding the mouse button down. Time to go home.

He saved the files, turned the computer off, locked his desk drawers and slipped on his leather jacket. Rain splattered on the black mirror of the window as he avoided the gaze of his reflection.

He was in his thirties, but his scalp showed through his hair if he stood with light in the wrong place and his skin had the dead whiteness of someone who hadn't seen daylight for a while. He tugged his collar up and adjusted the lapels. He wanted to look like Harrison Ford in *Blade Runner*, but he had a terrible feeling he looked more like Flash Harry the spiv in the *St Trinian's* films.

As soon as the lift doors opened, he sprinted across the lobby, rucksack hanging from one shoulder, hoping the security guard wouldn't see him before he got out of the building.

''Scuse me, sir!'

Damn. He turned, his fingers on the door handle.

The guard marched toward him, a smile on his face. His buttons were little brassy lights scattered across his uniform. 'Big weekend coming up, sir. Three hundred of us in full armour doing the battle of Bosworth Field. You going to be there, sir?'

He shook his head, knowing how fake his smile must have looked. 'No. No, I'm going out. Sorry.' As the guard opened his mouth to start another conversation, Willaker quickly muttered, 'Got to go – train to catch,' and scooted out.

As the doors slid shut behind him and the rain pricked at his face, he glanced back. The guard's face had fallen into tragic lines, like a puppy who'd had his chewy bone snatched away. Willaker

shrugged apologetically at him through the glass door. He felt

guilty, but not guilty enough to go back in and talk. The man was an obsessive historical re-enactment buff who spent his every spare moment making armour and practising swordplay. Willaker had

made the mistake of asking him one Monday morning what sort of

weekend he'd had, and had spent the next half hour locked into a one-sided conversation about how the man had been taking part in a Viking assault on a castle in Kent and beaten some poor Saxon

black and blue with the flat of his axe blade. All Willaker had done was to make appreciative noises and run away the moment a

dispatch rider provided a convenient distraction, but ever since then the guard had treated Willaker like a bosom buddy, assuming that he shared the same hobbies.

He shook his head and let his eyes wander away from the guard

and across the front of the building. It was a truncated pyramid built

out of orange stone and tinted glass. Spotlights illuminated its Aztec facade. The Managing Director had designed it himself, and every time Willaker looked at it he wondered why anyone ever employed

the firm.

The walk home took half an hour on a good day, and there was

precious little shelter from the rain, but he hated taking the bus. He had the kind of face that made people insist on telling him the story of their lives. Old women would detail the honors of their recent varicose vein operations, while men in old, stained shirts would explain how they left plastic bottles full of water on top of their televisions so that, if the sets caught fire, the plastic would melt and put the fire out. And he would listen, nodding in the right places, counting the bus stops until he could get off.

He couldn't face it tonight, not after the security guard had

already started things off. He'd get a taxi.

There was a café just opposite the building: a space between two buildings that had been roofed with sheets of corrugated iron and

fronted with peeling wooden boards. The taxi drivers often stopped there for a cup of tea and a bite to eat. Willaker had never been inside – he usually made his sandwiches the night before and ate them at his desk – but he had often hailed a taxi outside as the driver was pulling away. Two cars were parked outside, their

outsize aerials vibrating as the rain beat against them. Willaker checked the road for traffic then sprinted across to the other side, rucksack held up to ward off the rain.

The door banged open and two men emerged in a blare of light,

smoke and noise. One of them turned and shouted something at the people still inside as his companion held the door open. Willaker's gaze flickered between them: which one to go for? Which one was

less likely to make small talk?

The man holding the door was stuffing a bacon sandwich into his

mouth with his other hand. His fingers gleamed with grease. He

hadn't shaved for a few days. The other man, now turning away

from the café and glancing over at Willaker, was tall, with dark, curly hair and a corduroy jacket that had seen better days worn over a linen shin and tweed trousers. He looked more like a bohemian

student than a taxi driver. He grinned at Willaker, and his entire face seemed to light up.

'Are you free?' Willaker asked him.

The man glanced over at his companion, who shrugged. Turning

back to Willaker, he nodded. 'I do believe I am.' His voice was

deep and rich. 'Where would you like to go? Geographically, I

mean, not philosophically. I'm afraid I don't go south of Immanuel Kant on a Friday night.'

33

It had been a long day. That was his only excuse. The phrase

Mallard Close had been on the computer screen in front of him

throughout his marathon subterranean mapping session. It didn't

matter that he lived in a first-floor flat in Curmore Road and that building wasn't scheduled to start on the Greenfen development for another six months: he was tired, and the first words to come out of his mouth were 'Mallard Close, please.'

The taxi driver grinned engagingly, eyes wide and full of glee.

'Mallard Close it is.' He headed for the second car, a Peugeot that gleamed red under the neon streetlights.

Willaker waited until the driver unlocked the passenger door, and then climbed in. He glanced out of the window while the driver

started the car. The other man, the one with the bacon sandwich, was staring after them with a frown on his face. He took a step

forward, as if to ask them something, and then thought better of it.

Shaking his head, he walked toward his own car.

They pulled out and accelerated along the road. Street lights

flickered past in an increasing rhythm, and Willaker suddenly felt the weight of the day descend on him. If he phoned out for a

takeaway and had a bath while he was waiting for it to arrive, then he could eat it in bed while watching *Newsnight*. A couple of bottles of beer to settle his stomach and he could be asleep by eleven.

Can I take it that you've had a long day?' the taxi driver asked without turning his head away from the road.

Willaker muttered.

'Slaving over a hot computer screen?'

'Yeah,' he replied. Conscious that he might have sounded rude,

he added, 'Pretty late. Not as late as some nights.'

The driver shook his head. Willaker noticed that he drove with

one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the gear stick. His name and his photograph were stuck to the glove compartment

cover in a laminated cover. JOHN SMITH. DRIVER NO: 2286. ‘So

what is it that you do?’ the man asked. ‘For a living?’

‘I’m an architect.’

John Smith nodded, smiling. ‘Ah, an architect. Humans will

always need buildings, won’t they? Civilisations and religions rise and fall, art forms come in and out of fashion, but people will

always need somewhere to put their pot plants.’

‘That’s right,’ Willaker muttered. ‘We’re filling a basic human

need for mezzanine floors and concealed lighting.’

Driver number 2286. Willaker frowned. Surely the cab firm

couldn’t really employ over two thousand drivers. Maybe they had two offices, two sets of numbers, one set starting at one thousand and the other at two thousand. Or maybe they got through staff at an 34

astounding rate and they didn’t bother reassigning old numbers.

John Smith took a tight corner as neatly as if the car was on rails.

‘It must be very interesting, a job like that,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Most people don’t get much of a choice about the places they live and the places they work. Take me, for instance. I have a little *pied à terre* not far from here. It’s deceptively spacious on the inside, but the thing is that it’s portable. If I don’t like the neighbours I can just move to a different location.’

‘You live in a caravan?’ Willaker asked.

John Smith thought for a moment. ‘I suppose I do,’ he said,

surprised. Willaker glanced out of the window, and a sudden spasm of panic gripped his heart as he failed to recognise the road they were driving down. It seemed to be on the outskirts of an industrial estate: the saw-tooth silhouette of a factory stood out against the rain clouds on one side while a chicken-wire fence protected a

stretch of waste ground on the other. He’d never been there before, but somehow he recognised it. Strange, yet familiar.

It certainly wasn't on the way to Curmore Road.

'So, what do you think the defining architectural style of the next millennium is going to be, then?' John Smith asked cheerily as the factory vanished behind them and the car sped along the road to

nowhere, fenced in on both sides by the wire netting. 'My money

would be on concrete brutalism, but I'm willing to be convinced

that the Second Dynasty Sinan Empire might make a surprise

appearance.'

Willaker disregarded the question, which sounded like the man

had read it straight out of a textbook. Concrete posts flickered in the corners of his eyes. 'Are we going the right way?' he asked, an edge of panic in his voice.

Ahead, the road terminated in a circle of tarmac and a wire gate.

A sign on stilts had been erected behind the gate, saying Greenfen Housing Development. The planned start date in smaller letters

underneath was six months away. Willaker's firm got a credit as

architects.

John Smith brought the car to a fast stop, took it out of gear and looked sideways at Willaker for the first time. 'You wanted Mallard Close, didn't you?' He jerked a thumb at the fence. 'Well, we're here.'

'I wanted Curmore Road,' Willaker said heavily.

John Smith shook his head. 'You said Mallard Close. My hearing

is very acute, even if I do say so myself. Which I do.'

Thinking back, Willaker knew he was right. He could hear

himself saying the words. He was tired, he'd been thinking about Mallard Close all day, it was an easy mistake to make.

35

But that didn't explain...

‘Maybe I did,’ he said, conceding the point with a slight nod of his head, ‘but Mallard Close doesn’t exist.’

The driver frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, how did you know where Mallard Close is going to be?

The names of the roads in this development were only suggested

yesterday at an internal meeting of our company. The minutes

haven’t been written up yet, and it’ll be weeks before the names are ratified. How do you know where Mallard Close is going to be built before we’ve even told the council?’

John Smith’s face didn’t react, but his gaze darted away from

Willaker and toward the gate. ‘I… I believe I heard about it. Some of the other drivers were talking over a cup of tea and a bacon roll.’

A fierce curiosity swept over Willaker. ‘Uh-uh. Try again.’

John Smith smiled and shrugged. ‘Perhaps I saw it on a map?’

‘It’s not on any maps,’ Willaker snapped. ‘At least, not on any

printed ones.’

‘It is where I come from.’

‘And where’s that, then?’ He leaned forward aggressively.

‘The future.’ There was still a smile on John Smith’s face, but it was a different smile. A dangerous smile.

For a few moments Willaker couldn’t understand what the man

had said. He knew the meanings of the words, but he couldn’t see how they applied to the conversation. John Smith might just as well have said ‘applecart furiously’ or ‘goose wardrobe’. Then the

jigsaw piece slotted into place and he laughed. ‘The future? You mean you’re a time traveller?’

John Smith nodded.

Glancing around the shabby interior of the car, Willaker said

scathingly, ‘And I suppose this is your time machine, hmm?’

‘Don’t be foolish,’ John Smith replied, ‘this is a Peugeot.’

Willaker blinked rapidly a couple of times. ‘Okay. Fine. What’s

the fare so far, then? I’ll just get out and...’

‘And what? You’re right, my friend, Mallard Close hasn’t been

built yet. That was my mistake. With millennia to play around in, the odd decade here or there doesn’t seem important. Of course,

that’s what I said to Walter Raleigh on the day of his execution when I thought I was turning up for his wedding, but that’s another story.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘It’s always the little things that trip you up.’

‘My God, you’re *serious*, aren’t you?’

‘I’d better drive you home. If I let you out here then you’ve got a long walk back, and this is an isolated spot. Nobody will be

passing.’

‘Except another time traveller,’ Willaker said. He meant it to be sarcastic, but the words came out sounding resigned.

John Smith shot him a wide-eyed look as he reached for the gear

stick. ‘You’re taking this very calmly. Aren’t you going to tell me I’m insane?’ Willaker opened his mouth to say something, then

closed it again and swallowed. Somewhere in the depths of his

mind, he knew it was the only explanation that really fitted the evidence. Oddly, of all the things that might have convinced him, it was the casual mention of Walter Raleigh. That could have been

part of the man’s madness, of course, but John Smith had just

chucked it into the conversation without apology or explanation. He obviously believed it himself.

‘A few years back,’ he said finally, ‘a French electronic rock

musician named Jean-Michel Jarre played a concert in the London

Docklands –'

'It's all right,' John Smith interrupted. 'You don't have to explain who Jean-Michel Jarre is. I'm reasonably *au fait* with Earth's classical music.'

Willaker nodded. 'Right. Okay.' He gathered his thoughts

together. They had a nasty tendency to keep falling apart and

leaving him dazed. 'It was an open-air concert with the most

amazing light show you've ever seen – laser beams shining up onto the clouds, images projected onto buildings, all that and his music as well.' He paused, remembering. 'I was a student at the time,

studying architecture and design, and I couldn't afford a ticket.

Besides, I was more of a classical concert goer. Anyway, I was

driving back from lectures to my digs in Catford when I suddenly crested a hill and saw this incredible multicoloured glow from down by the river, this blaze of unearthly light that pulsed and danced in time with a deep rumbling.' He laughed. 'I thought a UFO had

landed. For a second or two, I really thought a UFO had landed

down by the river. "This is it!" I thought. "This is the year we make contact with aliens." Then I realised it was just a French rock

musician and his light show, and I felt so... so disappointed. Stupid, huh?'

John Smith shook his head, a half-smile on his lips. 'You want to believe,' he said softly. 'You want there to be more than can be seen by the naked eye. I can understand that.'

'Look, can we talk? Can I... can I ask you some questions?'

'Would you like a cup of tea? I could drive us back to the cafe.

There are no problems in life that can't be solved over a cup of tea.'

'Yeah, that would be great, but look, I don't want to take you

away from your job.' He caught himself. 'Your driving job, I mean.

I assume you've got another agenda as well.'

37

'Don't worry. This sort of thing is what I'm here for.'

'What sort of thing?'

'Talking. Listening.'

'But –' Willaker's mind was racing ahead of his words, and he

had to take a deep breath to calm himself down '– but aren't there any rules about, you know, giving things away?'

'What sort of things?' John Smith looked confused.

'The future.'

He laughed as he reversed the car into a turn. 'It doesn't work

like that. I'll explain it all when we get back to the cafe.'

The car raced off into the darkness. Willaker gazed out at the

jagged shape of the factory roof, his mind flickering between belief and disbelief, awe and worry. Was he being suckered? Was John

Smith just stringing him along, playing on his credulity?

He didn't think so. He really didn't think so.

The city built itself up around the moving car: hoardings

replacing fencing, walls replacing hoarding, houses replacing

factories. It was getting late. Public houses were beacons of light on street corners.

The car drew up in the same place it had left less than fifteen

minutes before. The other car was gone, its bacon sandwich-eating driver with it. 'Come on,' John Smith said, getting out He was,

Willaker realised, well over six feet tall. 'This place serves the second-best tea I've ever tasted. Corporal Bell made the best.

Shame about her. A great loss to the country.'

The café was long and thin. The floor was covered in stains and

the tables were topped with chipped Formica. A dozen men were

present, alone or sitting in pairs. A few of the pairs were playing cards. Halfway along one wall, a counter had been built around a serving hatch. A gleaming metal tea urn and a plastic display case full of buns sat on the counter. The man behind the counter looked as if he had been a wrestler in a previous existence. Did places like this really exist any more? It was like going back –

– in time. Willaker smiled at the sudden thought, but underneath the smile he detected the sharp edge of hysteria. He took a deep breath. 'Annex a table,' John Smith said, walking off toward the counter. 'I'll get the tea.'

Willaker sat down and tried not to display too much curiosity. He wondered how many of the men there were time travellers. If any. If the whole thing hadn't been run up out of whole cloth just for his benefit. 'Here you are,' John Smith said, placing a mug of tea in front of Willaker. He put his own mug down, then turned his chair around and straddled it. Folding his arms across the back, he gazed at Willaker out of soulful brown eyes. 'Let's cut to the chase – a 38

phrase I normally find very worrying, as it's so applicable to my life, but it seems apt here. I'm a student of history and I've travelled back in time. I drive a taxi because it's one of the best ways to study history that I've found. Does that answer a lot of your initial

questions?'

Willaker's mind freewheeled for a moment or two. 'Historian?'

he said stupidly. 'Driving a taxi?'

John Smith smiled. 'What is history?'

Surreal. This conversation was surreal. It occurred to Willaker

that he might have gone mad, had a stroke, been hallucinating,

anything.

Did it matter? Would it change the things he was doing if he

suddenly realised he was barking mad?

'History,' he said carefully, 'is what happens. It's events. Wars.

Treaties. Dates, times and places.'

John Smith shook his head. 'No. History is people. All the things you mentioned, they all boil down to what people do to other

people. The trouble is that after a thousand years the people and what they did have boiled away, and what you're left with is the dry residue.' The precision of the words clashed with his cheerful face and his Bohemian clothes. He looked down at his tea. 'If I leave this mug here and come back in a week or so, and if it's not been

cleared away by Fred over there, then what's left in the bottom is what's left of history when you take the people out.' 'And that's...?'

'That's what I'm doing here. That's what we're all doing here.

Anecdotal history. Straight from the horse's mouth, as it were.'

Willaker glanced round surreptitiously. 'How many people here

are time travellers?'

John Smith calmly glanced from face to face. 'Five. Six,

perhaps.'

'That many?'

'Have you never wondered why there are so many taxi drivers in

London? Have you ever wondered why they're so talkative? Some

are real, of course, but a lot of us are doing it for the stories.'

'Is there really that much history to collect?'

'Absolutely, and it will all be lost if we don't collect it.' He sipped his tea. 'Who was the first American to engage the Japanese in combat at Pearl Harbor?'

Willaker shrugged. 'I don't know. Some navy pilot? Does it

matter?'

‘It did to him. His name was Ray Budnick. He was a civilian, he

lived in Honolulu and he owned a light aircraft. Nice man, by the way. Owned an Alsatian. On Sunday the seventh of December, he

decided to take his plane up for a spin. Nice day, he thought. Skies 39

should be pretty clear. Of course, that morning they were full of Japanese Zeros who opened fire on him. They shot him up, but he

managed to get away by banking steeply and they carried on to

attack the naval base. He landed safely in the middle of the greatest airborne attack this century of yours will see.’

‘Is that true?’ Willaker asked, amazed.

‘As sure as I’m sitting here talking to you. I drove a cab in Maui for a while, and I heard the story from enough people, including Ray himself, that I’m positive it’s true.’ He shrugged. ‘Everybody knows about Pearl Harbor, but who knows about Ray Budnick? As

far as I’m concerned, he’s as much an important historical character as President Eisenhower.’

‘But –’ Willaker shook his head. ‘That sort of thing... it’s

incidental. I mean, it might be interesting, or funny, or sad, or whatever, but it’s not *important*. Not historically.’

‘You’re missing the point. The fact that Hitler or President

Reagan did something on a particular date isn’t as important as the fact they both consulted an astrologer before they did it. History isn’t a list of events, minute after minute, day after day, year after year – it’s a web of people and the way they react to each other.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Look, a while ago I was in New York,

driving a yellow cab. I got chatting to a policeman one night. He was on his way home from the night shift. I asked him about his job

– what it was like, what was the worst thing he’d ever seen, that sort of thing. Do you know what he told me? He said that there’s an

entire civilisation of people living beneath the streets of New York, in the subway tunnels. He told me that they almost never come up to the surface, and that some of them are albino and blind, they’ve been

down there for so long. He told me that they know the secret passages beneath New York – the abandoned subway lines, the

tunnels built for gas and hydraulic lines that aren't used any more, the boarded up basements and cellars that nobody knows exist, the sewers, and he told me how to find some of them. And that's what I do –1 and the others here, the others like me. I collect these stories.

I listen. I don't ask what *happened*: I ask what it was *like*.'

'But why?' Willaker asked. 'What use is the information?'

John Smith stared at him for a long moment. 'Because,' he said,

'one day my life might depend on knowing about the sewers

beneath New York. You can never have too much information.'

There was silence after he finished talking. Willaker stared at

him. For a moment he could see what John Smith was driving at: an organic view of time as an infinite series of connections between people. Something vibrant and alive, rather than the sterile series of dry facts he'd been taught at school.

'So where do I fit in?' he asked. 'Why are you spending time

talking to me? Am I part of history too? I've never done anything special. I probably never will.'

'You're part of history,' John Smith replied softly, 'whether you like it or not. Whatever you do, whatever you say, you've made

history. When the Greenfen Housing Development is built, you'll

be one of the few people who know its secrets.'

'But it hasn't got any secrets,' Willaker said. 'It's one of the most boring projects I've ever worked on.'

'There must be something unusual about it.'

'Well, some crazy old woman came into our office last month

telling us to stop the project.'

‘Go on.’

‘Said something about the bodies of plague victims being

dumped into the marsh in the seventeenth century.’

‘Well that’s quite interesting. Don’t you think that’s interesting?’

‘She was a crackpot. She said that if we see the walking dead we can use a mixture of Epsom salts, lemon juice and bleach to repel them. Crazy.’

‘Well,’ the Doctor answered, looking away and rubbing his chin

with the back of one hand, ‘I’ve always said crazy is relative. Or was that relatives are crazy? Never mind. Do go on.’

‘There’s nothing else to tell. We found no evidence to back up

her claims. Other than that, boring.’

‘Then what was the most interesting project you ever worked

on?’ John Smith said, leaning forward, eyes wide and fixed on

Willaker’s face as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

‘Chase Manor,’ Willaker said after a moment’s thought. The

name brought a memory to his mind of a wide neo-gothic frontage

set amid wild, unkempt grounds. ‘The owner was a bit of a nutcase.

He had this big Victorian house, and he wanted us to design some scientific laboratories. We had to work on a gas supply, and water and everything. He especially wanted a big skylight in the roof. He said it was for his plants, to help them grow. We tried to tell him that it was a structural weak point, but he was insistent.’

‘There you are,’ John Smith said. ‘You’ve told me something I

didn’t know before. One day, that may make a big difference. You may have made a big difference, just by talking to me.’

Willaker felt a sudden tight sensation in his throat, and he had to look away before John Smith saw the way his eyes had filled with tears. For a long while his life had been empty and meaningless, like a road

going nowhere under an overcast sky. John Smith's

words had opened up a rift in the clouds through which the sun was shining. He'd never thought of it that way before, but Smith was 41

right. He was a part of history. He was a part of that web, connected to everyone and everything, from kings to beggars, from birth to death.

He had to change the subject before he started crying. 'Do you

tell everyone you talk to you're a time traveller?' he asked. 'Or am I just lucky?'

'Not usually,' John Smith replied. 'I made a foolish mistake with you, and I felt I owed you an explanation.'

'I asked earlier whether you were worried about giving things

away about the future and changing time, and you said you'd

explain it later. Won't it affect things, me knowing that time travel is possible? Isn't there a chance 1 might do something different now, something I wouldn't have done before? What if my house

would have caught fire if I had gone home but, because you told me you're a time traveller and because I came here with you, I'm still alive? Won't that sort of thing change the future?'

John Smith half-smiled, and shook his head sadly. 'Time doesn't

work like that. You're confusing time and history. History's the one like a web of connections. Time's not like that at all. You know that there are elemental particles that matter is built up of?'

Willaker nodded

John Smith continued: 'Well, time's the same. There's a smallest possible unit of time, indivisible and complete. We call them

'moments'. You can change time, moment by moment, but as soon

as you stop changing it, the next moment that comes along will be the same as it was before. Unless you make a really big change, and then you drag time off course, but that's a thing we try not to do if we can help it.' He glanced at the clock behind the counter. 'But I digress. It's time I was getting back on the road. You know how it is: things to do,

people to talk to, invasions to thwart.' He pushed his chair back and stood up. 'It's been nice chatting to you. Good luck. One of the chaps here will take you home. Remember to talk to them as well. Even if your information doesn't save my life, it may save theirs.'

As John Smith walked off towards the cafe door, Willaker was

frozen for a moment. The hairs on the back of his neck began to

bristle. 'Wait!' he called after him. 'What about me? What happens now?'

But John Smith was gone.

By the time Willaker finished his tea the rain had stopped. He

walked home, the insane conversation with John Smith playing over and over in his head. He couldn't make any sense of it.

Back in his flat, with a takeaway dished out on a large plate, he picked up the remote from the side of the bed and turned the

television on. Colours swam up from the darkness of the screen:

tiny figures kicking a ball across an unnaturally green background.

The changing light levels cast flickering shadows across his

bedroom. He changed channels just in time to catch the opening

credits of *Newsnight*. Depending on how interesting the headlines were, he'd watch it while he was finishing his takeaway then settle down to sleep.

And then the office tomorrow, and more long hours moving lines

around a screen, followed by a takeaway and maybe a video. And

the next day, the same. It didn't matter what John Smith had said.

Once upon a time, when Willaker was a student, he'd dreamed of

making a difference, making his mark on history. He'd dreamed

that he would design buildings that would live on as a monument to

his name, but he knew now that history was passing him by and he would be forgotten, even before he died.

He leaned to one side and reached for the door of the bedside

cabinet. The light from the television reflected back as an amber glow from the bottle of whisky inside. His fingers closed around the comforting weight of the bottle.

History had forgotten about him. With enough whisky inside him,

he could forget about history.

43

Gudok

Mags L Halliday

An adventure of Tegan and Turlough, with the Fifth Doctor

The room was sumptuous, if you ignored the distant echo of shells fired from gunships at the port. Polished rosewood panels reflected the setting sunlight that poured in through rattling window frames, dust dancing in the rays. The mirrors were only faintly mottled with damp, and the red plush velvet of the upholstery smelt only slightly musty.

Tegan Jovanka, clad in a long, fitted dress of dark red damask

and wrapped in a glossily thick fur, glared furiously at Sasha. ‘You have got to be kidding me!’

The civil servant straightened his tie and looked concemed. ‘I am most sincerely apologetic, Tegan, but the only possible method of returning to St Petersburg is aboard the trans-Siberia railway.’

Tegan turned her glare on Turlough, who was, she thought,

unfairly hogging the fire. He shrugged, then sighed. ‘Can’t we go by plane?’

‘It’s 1904. The Wright brothers have barely flown sixty feet yet, never mind starting a passenger service across two continents.’

‘Ordinarily,’ Sasha interjected, ‘we would suggest winter

travellers sail via India to the capital but, as Vladivostok is currently besieged by the Japanese fleet...'

Another shell echoed across the bay, causing the faintest of

tremors in the glass chandeliers. Tegan cursed the teleportation device that had brought them here in the first place. She cursed the fact it had detonated, leaving them stranded in the besieged port.

She cursed the Doctor, since she suspected he had a hand in the

explosion. She'd have words with him when they met up at the

other end of the journey. She cursed Turlough, because he was

almost definitely up to no good, as usual. She cursed Sasha, their long-suffering diplomatic ally, for being so bloody reasonable.

Wrapping the fur tighter around her, she cursed herself as she

nodded in agreement and strode out of the lounge.

Walking down the platform, with the clamour and chaos of the

station all around, Tegan felt her annoyance melting in the familiar warming rush of departure. Travelling. Journeying. Gadding about, as Aunt Vanessa had it. It was the same feeling as when she had

ridden down a dusty road on the bed of a farm truck, or taken the controls of her father's Cessna. So the train would be slow. So she'd have to endure Turlough for company. But she'd be travelling

again.

'Madame Jovanka?'

A handsome young man was standing beside the iron steps up

from the low platform, bowing slightly. This was their carriage: coach B, first-class from Vladivostok to St Petersburg. He held out a hand to help her up the steps, and she managed well, despite the hobbling skirt of her dress.

'I am Rodya, your attendant. If you will wait in the corridor a

moment, the porter and I will ensure all your luggage is safely in your rooms.' Rooms. She liked that. The narrow corridor ran down the left side of the carriage. She walked a little way along it, her skirts rustling as they brushed the walnut panels. The rooms were hidden behind panels to her right, and discreet brass fittings held cards with their names. Booked in as a couple, annoyingly, but she was amused to see she was above Turlough. It was outside that she really wanted to see though. She leaned out of the opened window, reluctant to let go of the sound and bustle of the station. Identical whistles were blasting out, seconds apart, but the various train crews knew which signalled what. Ahead, a couple of low platforms away, Sasha was talking to a cluster of men huddled near the heat of another engine. At the second blast of the whistle, as the trans-Siberian train shrieked its acknowledgement, he nodded brusquely and began a weaving dash back between people and across tracks to swing himself onto Tegan's coach. The train he had left behind was already moving, a local service steaming ahead, and the flow of

people close to it surged. There were shouts and frantic hand-

waving, then whistles were screaming and the trans-Siberian

juddered into life. As the first-class carriages clanked past the suddenly stopped local train, Tegan saw the dark mass of people

raise something up. There was the stark white of flesh and bone and glimpses of red amidst the grey gritty steam.

'A jumper!' someone yelled above the clamour and Tegan

recoiled as she realised, as the scene disappeared behind them, that it had been a body. Turning, nauseous, she saw Sasha still at the door to the carriage staring back into the station. He looked around and his face was ashen.

* * *

45

The sliding door from the corridor opened into a small ornate sitting room containing an equally small and ornate samovar over a black stove and two tapestry armchairs. Beyond them double doors stood slid open, revealing a large bedroom dominated by a broad, plump bed. Another stove glowed in one corner, and Tegan's trunk lay on the floor. Turlough was emerging from a hidden door, his face

damp.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked. ‘You look pale.’

‘There was an accident. Someone fell under the next train: he’s

dead.’ Turlough was silent, his face nonplussed and one hand still absently drying his neck.

‘Sasha knew him,’ Tegan added, hoping for a reaction.

Sometimes she thought Turlough’s every expression was carefully

calculated, schooled by signals from his devious little brain.

‘Oh. There’s just the one bed.’

‘That’s it? “Oh”?’

Turlough shrugged. ‘I didn’t know him. What do you want me to

say?’ Tegan felt herself glaring and knew she couldn’t stop it. She also suspected him of liking to goad her, like a schoolboy with a tiger snake.

Casting about the room for an excuse to be cross, she registered what he had said.

‘Well, you’ll just have to take the floor then,’ she informed him.

‘You can take the floor if you like,’ he said, throwing the damp towel onto the bedcovers, ‘but I won’t.’

Dinner was strained.

The first-class dining car was looking a touch down at heel, the meat was heavy and it turned out Sasha was not permitted to join them. As a civil servant, he was only allowed into the second-class dining car a few carriages down. Tegan and Turlough had sat

opposite each other in silence. She had a view of the other

passengers and, in lieu of an actual conversation, she mentally

catalogued them. Judging who might be trouble when on a long

haul was instinctive.

Yevgeny Petrovitch Bazarov had made himself known

immediately. A smartly trimmed bear of a man squeezed into a

table set for four, he had dined alone and complained about each course. She knew, from the little cards in the corridor, that he had the other suite in their carriage: she was willing to bet that he snored loudly.

The other occupants were a ruddy-faced matron and her pallid

daughter, or perhaps ward. Madame Ranevskaya and Mademoiselle

Varya were both fair and dressed in fine gowns. Madame's eyes

were large and restless though, darting about suspiciously, whilst Mademoiselle's were downturned.

After dinner, Bazarov was apoplectic to learn that the usual

second-class lounge car had been left behind so that more troop

carriages could be included. The first-class travellers would have to share their lounge with second-class. Having vented at Rodya, and then at Rodya's superiors, Bazarov growled his way down to the

lounge, because, as he informed Turlough, 'I'll be damned if I'll be chased out of my own lounge because of some damn bourgeoisie.'

'Quite right, sir,' Turlough had murmured, then winked at Tegan.

Madam Ranevskaya let out a little cry when she discovered the

lounge was lacking the piano the brochure had promised. 'Your

father is so keen for you to practise every evening,' she reminded Varya. Tegan saw that the Mademoiselle looked up for the first time and smiled with relief.

Sasha was waiting for them, sitting at a low corner table with a bottle of wine and three glasses before him. He had his back to the walls, so he could see the whole lounge car, and he was tapping out a pattern on his notebook cover. He rose and fussed around Tegan, holding her chair for her. She could feel Bazarov's eyes, still

glowering at the middle-class interloper, drilling into her spine.

There was only one other person in the car. Like Sasha, he sat at the second-class end, as if aware of being there on sufferance. He was drinking tea and reading a newspaper with frowning concentration, though, as if forgetting his surroundings.

'That's Fedotik,' Sasha said in a low voice, 'the only other

second-class passenger prepared to risk the lounge. And I can see why: Bazarov is a well-known reactionary – he thinks the old Tsar's reforms gave up too much power – and the daughter of the

ambassador to China would be dancing on the tables if she'd not

contracted typhoid. Far too rich company for the likes of us.'

'And us?'

'You are foreigners: they will be polite, but not hostile.'

Tegan shrugged, and turned her back on the room.

'That man, as we left Vladivostok...?'

'Yes,' Sasha sighed. 'He was a contact A very valuable one.

Previously, you were my guides in your world of intrigue: now I

will be yours in mine. That man gave me an urgent message for my superiors in St Petersburg. His death suggests the insurgency is close at hand.'

'Insurgency? We'll be safe aboard the train though? I mean, there are four carriages stuffed with soldiers at the back.'

'That does not make our journey safe. Perhaps even the opposite.

This war in the east is not popular. At the moment there is a threat 47

of a military uprising as well as the Bolsheviks spreading their nonsense amongst the working classes. There is talk of strikes and protests, at the very least. The message must get through.'

Turlough leaned forward over his tea. 'Can't you telegraph it to them or something?'

Sasha shrugged. ‘Such things are not nearly secure enough. There are switchboard operators, clerks and the like. I do not even trust the encryption system, as the military have code-breaking skills.

Sometimes the best way to keep a secret is inside your own head.’

Turlough sat back at that, and Tegan smiled to herself. She was

sure he had bundles of secrets tucked away. She heard Fedotik’s

paper rustle and glanced towards him. He was leaning forward to

refill his cup and caught her eye. Never trust a man with a beard, her Aunt Vanessa had said, because they have something to hide.

‘Where are we now?’ Turlough asked from the depths of one of the armchairs.

After two days on the train, they had settled into an only slightly uneasy routine. By day, Tegan sat in an armchair Rodya pulled over to the window of their sitting room, curled herself up as best as her dress allowed and watched the landscape glide past, whilst

Turlough read Crime and Punishment in the other chair. Tugging on a bell pull would bring fresh water for the samovar, or logs for the stoves, or snacks from the lounge. Tegan had asked Rodya for a

map of the route, so that she would know where they were. The

frozen rivers and skeletal trees – bare save for winter snow – of the Maritime province had mutated gradually into the swampy basin of the Amur River and then the empty grasslands rose into the harsh dry mountains near Mongolia. Tegan had watched the sunsets as the train thundered towards the west: the skies turning pink and purple and gold before darkening to a piercingly cold blackness. Rodya

would appear then, dropping the blinds to keep in the heat, and

turning down the bed.

Every hour or two, they’d walk down to the lounge car to find

sweetmeats and other people’s company. Tegan would talk to

anyone, just to have a conversation instead of the silence in their rooms, but Turlough would simply exchange brief muted comments

with the various gentlemen and settle back down, Dostoevsky still in hand.

Meals were served in the first-class restaurant car, where Tegan tried hard not to notice Bazarov's greed as he shovelled down

everything on the menu and washed it down with champagne. On

the first night, after an initial attempt to sleep on the floor or on the two armchairs shoved together, Tegan had grabbed the wide bolster
48

pillow and used it to divide the bed, ignoring Turlough's snicker.

On the second night, Rodya had left them extra pillows when he

turned down the bed, silently acknowledging the bolster's use as a barrier.

'We're coming into Ulan Ude, the gateway between Mongolia

and Siberia,' Tegan said now.

'Is it interesting?'

'More interesting than the story ofa murderer's self-justifying

whinging,' she said, gesturing at the book. 'We've a stop of an hour here, so we may as well take a stroll.'

Turlough grumbled but pulled on his heavy overcoat and helped

her into her fur. Rodya was waiting at the door of the carriage to help her down onto the platform, and smiled at her thanks. She saw the dark swelling of a bruise on his cheekbone.

'Rodya? Have you had a fall?'

'Yes, Madame Jovanka.'

'Fell onto Bazarov's fist, more like,' Turlough muttered as they walked away towards the engine. He tucked her hand over his arm, partially as their pretence dictated it and partially so she wouldn't slip. The platform was frosted over. The only sign of life in the pre-dawn city was the warm glow of gaslight from the station's tavern.

A handful of hawkers were offering up hot drinks and food to the

passengers.

‘What?’ Tegan asked.

‘You must have noticed, Tegan. Bazarov likes things just so, and the fault is always Rodya’s. I heard him berating him last night, and this morning... a black eye. He’s not exactly a restrained type of man.’

‘You always presume the worst’

‘So trolley dollies never get abusive passengers?’

‘The preferred term is... yes, they do get abuse. And advances.

And the odd threat. Poor Rodya.’

‘Poor Rodya probably earns more in a month for enduring the

likes of Bazarov than some of the people on this platform earn in a year.’

‘That doesn’t make it fair.’

‘No, but who said life was fair? Not even the Doctor thinks that.’

‘He’d like it to be though, which is better than you.’

They stood in silence and watched the engineers working on the

engine for a few minutes, then turned back to head for the tavern and a hot drink. Tegan tightened her grip on his arm.

Turlough, have you noticed Fedotik?’

‘Beard. Glasses. Reads the newspapers a lot.’

Always watching us,’ she said, nodding very slightly towards the 49

man. She had spotted him, leaning against the station wall, hands in pockets and eyes on her. At their approach he stood and wandered –

far too casually in her opinion –towards the bar. Tegan felt the too-familiar tingle of fear. ‘I’m going back to the train.’

‘You’re paranoid. You’re the one who wanted a walk.’

Tegan shrugged and removed her hand from his arm. ‘Go ahead.

Sit in a local bar and read your book.'

Turlough shook his head and smiled at her. 'I'm not as unfeeling as you think I am, you know. I'll go and have a word with Sasha. I bet he's already in there.'

The civil servant was waiting in their sitting room, however,

pacing back and forth with the blinds down.

Tegan! You are just the person! Please, close the door at once.'

'Sasha, am I glad to see you. Should you be in premiere class

though? Bazarov...'

'The door, please!'

With the door closed, he strode over to her then turned away to

the small stove and poured himself some tea from the samovar. She could see his hand tremble slightly as he raised it, and the darkness of his eyes.

'Tegan, I am most worried about the message.'

'I'm worried too – have you seen Fedotik? He was on the

platform just now, watching Turlough and me like a hawk. I don't like it.'

Sasha shook his head. 'Fedotik? Maybe. I don't know. Or... well, there are so many people it could be. I fear there is someone on this train who wants to stop the message. I have woken several times in the night with the sensation that my life is in danger. Ordinarily, I would keep the secret to myself but... since Peter's death I fear I am the only carrier of a message which could prevent the empire falling to chaos and... after all the things we went through... the

instantaneous transportation, those creatures, that evil man... I saw how you responded to all these threats and I am sure I can trust you.'

'But not Turlough?'

'No. There is something sly about him. I waited until I could

speak to you alone, Tegan.'

The door to the corridor slid back violently. ‘Hello, Sasha. Have I interrupted something? Do carry on.’

Turlough entered and slung himself into his armchair. Sasha put

down the china cup he still held.

‘So today we will be crossing Lake Baikal, the deepest lake on

Earth.’ Tegan took her cue. ‘How do we cross it by train?’

‘Our Russian engineers are most ingenious, Tegan. At the eastern 50

shore, we will disembark and board an ice-breaker. The train itself will be carried over on a second boat and then we will rejoin it on the farthest shore.’

‘Sounds fun.’ Turlough remarked, leaning over to raise the blind.

Sasha winced and his eyes pleaded with Tegan’s.

‘I will find you on the *Baikal*,’ he said, and hurried out

‘This is insufferable! Why was I not informed sooner?’

‘We did notify all passengers after we left Ulan Ude, Monsieur.’

‘I have had to leave personal possessions in my rooms whilst we

undergo this... degradation.’ Bazarov pushed past Rodya, so that the steward had to step backwards to avoid being shoved against the

gangplank rail. Tegan caught Rodya’s eye and gave a supportive

smile.

The ice-breaker, the Baikal, was small and cramped. The troops

and third-class passengers had not even boarded, but would have to wait for the boat to return for them. As the Baikal left the frozen shore, it shuddered, each foot through the icy water bringing

another crack from the reinforced bow. Below deck was fetid with stale breath, so half of the passengers were out on the deck where the fresh, below-zero air would prevent any sickness. The lake was only half-frozen, the ice too weak to carry the sleighs used in the real depth of winter, and the tree-lined shores were wreathed in freezing mist.

The midday sun was nothing but a white disk in the grey clouds and the mountains were stark and slate-bleak. Tegan

was slowly pacing around the deck, stem to bow and back again,

pausing to watch the other boat in their wake. The Angara carried the train itself, split into three and tied to rails laid on the decks.

She'd been hoping that Turlough would grow bored of her circuit

and retire inside with his novel so that Sasha could speak to her again, but for the first time on the journey he seemed interested in their surroundings.

'It's so deep because it's on a continental rift,' he said with

something approaching enthusiasm. 'Imagine it. Below us are the

plates of Europe and Asia, slowly drifting apart and deepening the water.'

'Thanks, I feel so much better knowing that.'

Turlough shrugged. 'Suit yourself I thought you liked all this

stuff.' Ordinarily she would, but right now she just wanted to be left alone. Turlough finally sensed it. 'Fine. I'll leave you to freeze with your lovely mountains.'

Tegan continued her circuit, pacing slowly so that Sasha would

get the chance to fmd her without being too obvious. Bazarov had seen him in the first-class coach at Ulan Ude and upbraided Rodya 51

again, threatening to get him dismissed if he let the lower orders in again.

'Man overboard!' someone shouted and the cry was taken up.

The boat shuddered to a halt and Tegan, her heart thumping in place of the engines, ran to the stem rail where several crew were paying a rope out. In the water, where the wake was throwing the slushy ice back together, a man was struggling. His hands were scrabbling for purchase on the melting ice, and it kept crumbling under him. A crewman was being lowered onto the slippery surface, where he

began walking tenderly over the wavering ice, arms out for balance.

‘It’s Sasha,’ Turlough said in her ear, and Tegan glanced wildly to see him frowning beside her.

‘How?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, eyes still on the rescue attempt. The

crewman had reached Sasha now, and was hauling him onto the

surface. The shifting ice kept tilting and turning and the men were agonisingly slow to return. The crewman tied Sasha to the rope so that he could be pulled back up onto the desk, then climbed after him.

Tegan pushed through the crush, reaching Sasha as he was being

bundled into grey blankets. The captain had arrived, and went to gesture her back. ‘I’m sorry, Madame, but he was in the water too long –’

‘Take him inside then!’

‘It won’t make any difference. His heart is failing. Now please...’

‘He’s our friend,’ Turlough said and the Captain’s face softened.

‘I am sorry. He must have slipped on the deck and... well.’

Tegan crouched in the pool of slush surrounding the dying man,

felt the blankets till she could grip his arm through them. ‘I’m sorry, Sasha.’

‘Te-Tegan. I was looking f-f-f-f-for...’

‘I’m here now.’

Sasha’s eyes focused briefly, not on her but on Turlough by her

side. ‘No a-a-a-acciden’. Need... message.’

Tegan knelt closer, uncaring as her silk dress was ruined by the icy water seeping into it. She put her ear almost against Sasha’s mouth so she could hear his failing voice.

‘Guh...’

‘It’s OK, Sasha. Trust me,’ she whispered.

‘Gudok.’ His lips brushed her ear then dropped away as he fell

back. Tegan looked at his face for a moment. The lines by his eyes, darkened by the shadows of his worry, were frozen there, the lake’s water leaving him looking old and fearful. She released his arm and stepped back.

52

‘Did he tell you?’ Turlough asked, and Tegan felt sick.

She tried to push her way through the crush of people

surrounding them, and heard Bazarov’s rumbling voice. ‘Most

tiresome. I trust this will not delay us?’

Tegan ran at him. ‘He’s dead. *Dead*. He’s not something

inconvenient to be discarded like litter!’

‘Really, Madame Jovan –’

‘I wouldn’t put it past you to have shoved him over for daring to have set foot in first-class, you piece of –’

‘Monsieur, please, control your wife.’ Bazarov cut her off by

turning to Turlough. She felt hot blood rising, sharpening the cold air around them. ‘I’m talking to you, Bazarov

‘No, Madame, you are shouting. You are distraught. Hysterical.

What reason would I have to push that man overboard?’

As she raised her arm, she felt Turlough grabbing her, hands

digging through the fur to bite at her biceps. ‘Come on, Tegan, let’s get inside. You’re in shock. I’m sure the crew can find you a tot of something.’

‘I am not in shock. I am not distraught. I am –’

He leaned in close, pressing against her side to bring his lips to her ear. ‘If someone did murder Sasha –’

‘If?’

‘If they did then we shouldn’t draw too much attention to

ourselves, should we? It’s another three days to St Petersburg, and the killer will be aboard the train.’

Tegan turned to stare at him. He was right, of course. She knew

that but, just as she admitted it, all her doubts about him returned.

Sasha hadn’t trusted him with the message, had abruptly stopped

talking around him. She’d seen Turlough occasionally talk to people in the lounge car: short brief conversations with Bazarov and

Fedotik. She’d left him to go into the bar at Ulan Ude alone, in fact, following Fedotik. And he’d not been with her when Sasha fell to his death.

They reboarded the train, just as dinner was being prepared.

Dumping their coats in the sitting room, Turlough had guided her to her chair in the dining car and ordered extra wine.

‘You’re still pale.’

‘And getting me drunk will help how?’

‘It’ll help you – us – sleep. There’s no point worrying. It could have been an accident like the captain said.’

Except that when they returned to their rooms, their coats were on the floor of the sitting room and their belongings were scattered about. In the bedroom, the mattress had been overturned.

53

‘This is not an accident,’ Tegan said and Turlough, scowling as

he found his novel had been flung to the floor and his place lost, nodded in agreement.

‘It’s not. And whoever it was clearly doesn’t care if we know it either.’

Tegan collapsed onto the edge of the bed and sunk her face into

her hands. All she’d wanted was a quiet few days getting back, a break from the continual chaos life with the Doctor entailed. The simple

pleasures of travelling without aliens or monsters or death interrupting them. Instead death was following them on the railway.

She wanted to go home: this was just so unfair. She felt powerless, and she hated it. Hated not knowing what to do next, hated feeling so lost. And now she was crying, gulping down the air and wishing she could do something, anything to vent the frustration. And, she realised, she was letting Turlough hold her. He had one arm around her shoulders, not saying anything, and that was wrong. 'I'm not upset,' she growled out, shrugging him off, 'I'm angry. And don't think you'll win me round.'

'Grief, do you have to assume an ulterior motive to everything?'

'With you? Yes.'

There was a long pause. 'Fine. Well, we've both got to get to the other end of the line alive, so maybe we should work together rather than stab each other in the night?'

Tegan scowled. 'Stop being reasonable.'

'So who had access to the rooms whilst we were at dinner?'

'Anyone. We didn't lock it.'

'Maybe it was just a robbery?'

'Of what? We've nothing of real value except what Sasha told

me.'

'Which you didn't write down.'

'Right.'

'So the only place that message resides is in your head.'

Tegan suddenly felt cold. Two men had died carrying the

message already and now whoever it was knew it was only in her

head.

'Where are we now?' Turlough asked after dinner the next day.

They'd had a poor night's sleep despite his suggestion of wine to

soften their nerves, and Tegan knew he was trying to keep her

engaged after a long lethargic day. They needed their wits about them if they were to get to St Petersburg alive. Well, if she was to.

‘Ekaterinburg. Just another two nights from the end of the line.’

Turlough looked out of the window. They were pulling through a

noticeably European city now, snow-clad roofs with steeples rising 54

above them and steam from factories billowing up. The yellow cast to the sky suggested more snow to come as the line turned north

towards Moscow and St Petersburg.

‘I’ve heard of that one,’ he said. Tegan raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s in the history books,’ he explained. ‘It’s where they kill the Tsar. Don’t look so surprised: I had to do modern history in that school, you know.’

‘I’m just thinking that talking about killing the you-know-who

might not be wise!’

Turlough shrugged and sipped his tea. Tegan looked around the

lounge car. Something was different, and it took her a moment to realise it was an absence not an addition.

‘Where’s Bazarov?’

Turlough shrugged. Tegan went over to Madame Ranevskaya and

Varya.

‘No, Madame, we’ve not seen the Monsieur since breakfast.

Perhaps he is ill and dined in his rooms?’

Returning to their table, Turlough muttered at her, without

looking up from his novel. ‘Fedotik has been watching: perhaps you should ask him?’

Tegan nodded and approached the other man. He politely put

down his newspaper and half-stood to greet her. The light from the lamp close by hit his glasses and turned them opaque white.

‘Excuse me, Monsieur Fedotik. Have you seen Monsieur

Bazarov?’

‘Alt no, Madame. Our great landowner has not graced the lounge

with his presence today. Perhaps he no longer wishes to share his space with undesirables such as myself?’

Bazarov was not at breakfast either. Tegan found that unlikely:

Bazarov had enjoyed his morning meal with his usual gusto no

matter how much he had drunk the night before.

Turlough was buttering toast for them both and encouraging her

to drink her coffee.

‘Maybe he is our man,’ he suggested. ‘He’s been lying low since

the trouble on the boat’

‘Without food? The man who could eat a five course dinner for

two on his own?’

‘Yes, that is unlikely. I’m not sure what he’d gain from stopping the message either. He’s a big landowner...’

‘In every way...’

‘... and landowners aren’t going to support anything that disrupts their world.’

Finishing her coffee, Tegan headed back to their carriage. Rodya 55

was in their room, still remaking the bed. ‘I will only be another five minutes.’

‘No, that’s fine, Rodya. We’re concerned about Bazarov: he’s not been seen since before Ekaterinburg. Has he taken to his rooms?’

Rodya’s hand dropped to his waist and pulled up a key.

‘I have a pass key, Madame. Monsieur Bazarov has not called for

me for over 24 hours which is unusual. Perhaps he is ill?’

Turlough joined them in the corridor as Rodya tapped on the door to the other set of rooms.

‘I think we should leave it, Tegan. You know how Bazarov reacts

to every little thing: if he is ill and hasn’t called for help then I can’t see him being happy about being disturbed.’

‘Or he could be so ill he needs help and hasn’t been able to call out for it’

Having received no reply, Rodya unlocked the door and slid it

open. Inside, the sitting room was icy. Turlough placed his hand on the small stove.

‘Stone cold.’

Tegan went to the double doors to the bedroom, which stood

wide open. Beyond, the room was as chaotic as theirs had been.

Trunks were open and books and papers spilled out. And, on the

floor and half-hidden by the bed, Bazarov lay dead. The bell cord which could have called for help was wrapped tightly around his

thick neck and his dead eyes bulged.

There was no possible chance that it was an accident.

They waited for the evening, after the train had passed Moscow and was on its final non-stop run to the capital. Turlough knocked a glass of red wine forwards. It spilled across the table and splashed her dress so that Tegan could take umbrage.

‘You’re drunk again,’ she said loudly.

‘Tegan, really, I just –’

‘Don’t “Tegan” me. You’ve not been sober since Baikal.’

‘Like you haven’t been difficult! Tell me what Sasha said to you that’s

made such a difference?'

'I told you, I can't. It's his secret for me to keep. We get to Sr Petersburg tomorrow and I'll go straight to his superiors then and we can put this behind us.'

'Good, now sit down and finish your drink.'

'How can you drink at a time like this? I feel sick. You can stay up all night reading your damn novel if you like, but Its going to bed.'

'Fine, go.' Turlough waved a hand dismissively. Tegan lifted her skirts so she could storm out of the lounge car. She was certain the 56

eyes of everyone there had been on them, overtly or covertly.

In their rooms, Tegan prepared for bed as usual: changing from

the restrictive dress and corsets for a loose nightgown and washing her face till it glowed. She double-checked that the door to the corridor was not locked and turned down the lights in the bedroom.

The bolster stayed as a normal pillow and she closed her eyes.

Under the covers, she dug her nails into her palms to keep herself alert and recited Beatles lyrics to herself to count the time. This all rested on her trusting Turlough, which was a leap she wasn't sure she wanted to take.

She'd reached the third side of *The White Album* when she heard the doors to the bedroom slide quietly open and felt a cold draft on her face. Someone had come in. She shifted, as if her sleep was

being disturbed, and then sealed back. She had no idea who had

come in, where they were in the room, how soon she might expect –

There was a hand over her nose and mouth. Clamped tight and

roughly, pinching at her face. Her eyes flew open but with the

lamps out she couldn't see her assailant. The hand was male,

though, and she struggled against him. He shifted, pinning her

against the bed. She freed a hand from the covers and tried to reach his face. His other hand grabbed her wrist and forced it against the

pillow. She wrested her ace free for a second, tried to bite at his hand.

He reared back with a curse, and slapped her. Before she could

scream, she felt one of the pillows against her face. She bucked underneath him, and freed her hands. She clawed, aiming for where she thought his neck would be. She heard a hiss but the pressure quickly returned to the pillow and she found she couldn't draw

breath. Her hands and feet were flailing now, strength ailing.

Something hit them hard, shoving her attacker into her. Then his body was gone and there were thunderous crashing sounds from the floor. Tegan tried to sit up, shove aside the pillow.

She felt weak, wanted nothing more than to fall back on the bed, but she rolled till she could reach the bedside lamp. It was gone.

There was another crash, as something heavy hit the wall, and for a moment she saw a figure outlined in the doorway. There was a

crash from beyond and the cold draught from the corridor blasted in.

'He's turned over the stove,' Turlough said from the floor and she thought of the embers spilling across the carpet. Before she could move, he had the shovel and was scooping up the embers and

flinging them out of the window. Snow swirled in and sizzled as it hit the hot metal of the stove.

Tegan stood and was surprised at how dizzy she felt. She grabbed 57

the doorframe and watched as Turlough lit the lamps, rechecked the stove and shut the window. He finally looked at her and strode over to grab her elbow.

'Are you all right?'

She let him guide her to the bed and wrap her coat about her.

'Tegan?'

She raised her hands and saw they were shaking. He tightened his hold on her and she felt curiously reassured. She'd had to trust him to back her up and he had. When she sneaked an arm around him

and gave him a light hug, he winced.

‘Kicked in the ribs. Nothing I didn’t suffer on the rugby field,’ he said. ‘I can’t imagine you playing rugby.’ She was surprised at how hoarse her voice was, rough like her throat was sandpaper. She

coughed.

‘I tried not to. Are you all right?’

‘Didn’t foresee the pillow,’ she said. ‘Did you see his face?’

Turlough shook his head. ‘Didn’t get the chance: he was too

quick.’

Tegan raised her hands to the light and looked at the ripped nails, the short sharp edges raggedly broken. There was the suggestion of blood under them. ‘I got him, though.’

Tegan had her possessions packed by morning, as the train chugged through the suburbs of St Petersburg. She had been unable to sleep and sat watching the dawn turn the sky dove grey-pink until the call for breakfast came. She’d walked as far back down the train as she dared, trying to catch a look at the necks of all the men she passed, until she reached a car full of soldiers and reluctantly turned back at their hostile glares. Besides everyone was turning up their collars or wearing scarves or mufflers, in preparation for disembarking.

Returning to the restaurant car, she saw Turlough had gone back

to their rooms, leaving a pot of coffee on their table. She poured herself a cup, closed her eyes and sighed. They might not have

found the murderer, but in fifteen minutes they would reach the

station and she could be rid of the message.

‘Madame Jovanka?’

Looking up, she saw Fedotik was standing by her table. He

gestured to an empty chair and she nodded that he may sit.

‘I wish I had been able to speak to you earlier. I am in the same line of work as your late friend.’

‘Sasha?’

‘Indeed, poor Sasha.’

‘He didn’t recognise you.’

‘Would we have acknowledged it with an enemy on the train?

58

Someone knew Peter, Sasha’s man in Vladivostok, was an informer.

They pushed him under a train to silence him. They couldn’t risk Sasha reaching St Petersburg either and their agent aboard the train dealt with him very effectively out on the lake.’

‘And Bazarov?’

‘Maybe he saw something? Such as your room being ransacked?’

Tegan started and Fedotik smiled. ‘Oh, Madame Jovanka, I know

what has been happening on this train. I know you and Turlough are not married, I know you staged that fight last night, and I know you are a brave woman. Did someone attempt to take your life to stop the message?’

Tegan laughed. ‘I’m sorry, but I really don’t see why I should

trust you.’ Fedotik stood and bowed. As you wish, Madame. I only hope that you will reach those you do trust safely.’

Tegan frowned. That had sounded a lot like a threat.

Walking back through the swaying train, as it click-clacked over points, Tegan wondered how they could have blundered. The plan

had been simple: make it obvious that she was the only one to know the secret and lure out the murderer. She would fight him off, with Turlough to help if necessary, and they’d turn him over to the

authorities along with the secret. Her self-defence training had instinctively marked the man, she knew it from the ache in her

ripped nails and the dried blood under them.

They’d just failed to factor in the cold weather and that scarves were common here. She could have scratched Fedotik last night and they’d be none the wiser. Had he been trying to brazen it out with her,

seeing if she would fall for a direct attempt to prise the message from her when an assault had failed?

Rodya was standing near the open door of their carriage, in his

uniform overcoat with the collar turned up against the cold air

blasting in. As Tegan stepped past him, they jolted over a set of points, jarring her almost off her feet. Rodya caught at her elbow to keep her upright and she grabbed his lapels to steady herself.

‘My apologies, Madame, the final approach to the station can be

a little rough when the points are iced up.’

But, from her vantage point near his shoulder, Tegan wasn’t

listening. She was staring at what she could see, now only revealed behind his upturned collar. Three long scratches ran down his neck.

Rodya, a murderer? Rodya, who came in and made their bed,

cleaned the rooms and responded day or night to their requests.

Who had endured Bazarov’s abuse without a complaint. Rodya kill

Bazarov? That was perhaps possible, but attacking her? Sending

Sasha to his death? It was nonsense.

59

They were drawing into the station now, passing gantries and

posts, rattling over more points. She became very conscious that Rodya had not yet released her arm, that he had the door to the train open. Even going slowly, the train wheels could slice a person to ribbons.

She released her grip on his lapels, tried to step back. She found herself unable to look away from his suddenly cold-blooded eyes, as if knowing he would strike like a snake if she moved quickly.

‘We’re arriving. I had best get my coat –’

His grasp of her elbow tightened, and she mentally cursed the

skirt that hampered her chance to knee him and free herself. She had no choice, as he looked away and ahead for a moment, eager for his chance to throw her from the train. She screamed Turlough's name.

Rodya looked back at her, and she could see the hatred now. His

chance had been missed and the platform was rising up to greet

them. Dangerous, but probably not fatal. And Turlough was

barrelling down the corridor towards them. Rodya released her arm and spat at her. Then he was gone, dropping off the still-moving train and stumbling as he hit the platform. Even as he righted

himself, he was running for the station exit.

'Stop him! Murderer!' Turlough yelled, and pushed past her to

throw himself into the chase. People were staring, not quite

registering, and Rodya was dodging between them, about to reach

the platform gates. Tegan cursed her clothes as she swung herself down from the train. She raised her skirts high and ran, following the red of Turlough's hair through the darkly dressed mass of

people.

She saw Rodya vault the low gates, caught a glimpse of

something white, and he vanished. Whistles were blowing behind

her, and more shouts of 'murderer!' were echoing around the

station. A crowd was starting to gather, all in black and grey and she had to shove her way through towards Turlough. He had

stopped after leaping the gates himself, and was gasping out short barks of laughter. Rodya was on his knees on the concourse, one of his arms easily twisted up behind him by the Doctor.

'Pleasant trip?' the Doctor asked, with one eyebrow raised.

Before they could draw enough breath to answer, uniformed

policemen were surrounding them and Fedotik was taking charge.

Rodya was grabbed roughly and handcuffed. Fedotik pulled aside

the collar of the coat and saw the scratches. lie looked at Tegan and she nodded, accepting his story.

'If I tell you,' she asked, 'Will you tell me what it means?'

'That depends if it makes sense to me,' he replied.

'Gudok.'

60

' *Signal*? That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Thank you, Madame. Monsieur. It is the name of the

railwaymen's newspaper: we suspect they are preparing to strike.'

The policemen were hauling Rodya away, none too gently, as

Fedotik tipped his hat to them and followed. The crowd was

dispersing, the excitement over. To them, Rodya was just another murderer dragged off to face his punishment, for all that he was yelling about freedom and equality. Tegan leaned on the gates till she could speak without gasping.

'That,' she managed eventually, 'is the last time I take the scenic route.'

61

Generation Gap

Lou Anders

An adventure of the Third Doctor, with Sarah Jane

The peculiar grating sound should be familiar to you by now. It

heralds the manifestation of the blue box. The man who comes out of it is a contrast of curly hair and stately bearing in black cape coat and burgundy velvet jacket. The excessive frilly monstrosity on his chest is called a cravat. He is the alien known as the Doctor.

See how the lines on his face seem carved there as if by aeons of experience, his cunning old eyes shrewd as he takes in the

unfamiliar (to him) equipment of the laboratory? He approaches one table, instantly at ease with equipment the like of which he has never seen before, frowns down at the mineral deposit on the

examination tray. Then his companion steps out of the TARDIS and the frown softens.

‘Not where we intended to be again, are we, Doctor?’

‘Come now, that’s half the fun of it, isn’t it, Sarah Jane?’

The Doctor turns and smiles, and the ease between them

communicates volumes, despite the generations of her own kind

that could fit into a quarter of his lifespan. He motions for the girl to join him at the table. ‘Now look here. If I’m interpreting these readings correctly, this mineral has some very interesting properties.

Similar enough to carbonaceous chondrite. Quite common in outer

space but not something you’d expect to find in large quantities on a typical oxygen world in a system of this size.’

‘Not natural to these parts then, is it?’

‘That wouldn’t be my first guess, no. Nor do I recall any reports of Valdamar IV being a space-faring society. Quite the opposite, if memory selves.’

‘Isolationist?’

‘To the extreme. Oh, they’ve made small forays into their own

system with chemical rockets. But nothing further. Their religion denies that extraterrestrials even exist’

The girl called Sarah Jane looks up from the mineral deposits,

casts her glance around the room. Though you see, even by the

standards of her race, there is a keenness in her eyes that rivals the

Doctor's own. Nor is she squeamish about the biological samples

collected in tubes and beakers elsewhere, the organic experiments that form the majority of the lab's work.

'Doctor.'

'Yes?'

'What are mineral samples doing in a biogenetics lab anyway?

Not the sort of thing you'd expect to find here. A whole different discipline, I mean.'

'Perhaps. But the sciences need not have evolved the same on

every world. See what you can find. And put the light on too if you can.'

Sarah Jane walks towards a doorway in the wall, examines the

octagonal sensor panel set alongside. It is switchless and buttonless, but she demonstrates her own experience with alien systems when

she manages to bring up the lights with a few deft hand signals in front of the sensor plate. Meanwhile, the Doctor has begun

humming to himself; loudly.

'Not worried we'll be discovered with all that racket, are you?'

'Discovered?' he replies, 'Oh, well. We usually are, sooner or later.

Now, if I can just recalibrate their sensors, maybe reverse the –'

'Doctor,' Sarah Jane says, with a little gasp of breath.

'What's that?' he replies, big nose almost brushing the mineral

sample. 'I think perhaps it would be better if it were later. I don't think we want to be discovered right now.'

'Oh, I shouldn't worry, Sarah Jane,' he replies offhandedly.

Incredible how a man usually so observant can allow himself to be so distracted by curiosity that he misses the rising panic in her voice.

'Doctor,' she says again, and this time her tone registers.

‘What is it?’ he says, looking up, then follows the digit ofher

outstretched hand as she points to what is lying on the floor, the blood still pooling across the polished tiles.

And that is where you come in.

‘And you expect me to believe you had nothing to do with Silliams’

death?’ you say, still shaking with emotion at finding the intruders in your lab, the corpse of your colleague Professor Silliams still fresh on the floor. ‘Murder. Yes, and not by me,’ the strange man who calls himself the Doctor replies. There’s something wrong

about him, wrong about both of them, as if they aren’t from these parts. Not by a long shot. You’re outraged that he can be so calm in the epicentre of your suspicions, but there is something powerfully competent about him that prevents you reaching forward to stop

him when he kneels to examine the body.

‘The blood is just now coagulating,’ he says, feeling about the

slain victim’s neck while examining the greenish pool. ‘Your

species uses chlorocruorin to transmit oxygen instead of

haemoglobin, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ you hear yourself say, irritated with yourself that you are being so helpful. But already he’s engaged you at the level of a fellow scientist, hasn’t he? ‘What do you mean, “Your species”?’

‘Explains why this poor fellow’s blood is turning green as it

deoxygenates,’ he replies, not exactly forthcoming. Then he looks up, ‘And unless I miss my guess, it also sets his time of death at about seven minutes ago, three minutes before we entered the lab.’

‘I have only your word for that.’

‘Then give me something to help me convince you. What sort of

work goes on here?’

‘It’s very complicated,’ you begin, but you see the hint of

bemusement in his lifted eyebrow as you speak, so you drop your

patronising tone. ‘We’re looking at the structure of our own cells.’

‘DNA research,’ the Doctor says. ‘Genetic engineering, is it?’

‘More like genetic reverse engineering, actually.’ You find

yourself warming to this strange intruder despite the presence of your dead colleague on the floor. You indicate another bench in the lab. ‘We began by examining certain anomalies in our genomic

structure, patterns that seemed too regular to be accounted for by random evolution – but surely you know all about this. It’s been on all the news cycles for the last year.’ ‘We’re not from around here,’

the young woman offers. Before you can question where they are

from, the Doctor calls your attention to something beside the body.

‘Struck on the back of the head with a blunt instrument.’ He

holds up a cylindrical tube, about half a metre in length, with a handle on one end and a large bulb on the other.

‘That’s one of our sonic destabilisers,’ you say. ‘It’s used to melt mineral samples without touching them. It works by...’

‘Precisely calibrated sonic vibrations, yes, I know,’ says the

Doctor, and, in response to the question on your face: ‘I have a passing familiarity with the concept.’ He looks down at the dial on the destabiliser, lost in thought for a moment. ‘Not premeditated, then. Our killer just grabbed something to hand.’ Then his eyes

darken. ‘How many ways into this facility?’ he demands.

‘Only one.’

‘And did you pass anyone leaving as you entered?’

‘No,’ you reply, wondering why you are still the one answering

the questions.

‘Then I’m a fool for wasting time,’ the Doctor says, leaping to his 64

feet. ‘The murderer could still be in the building. Let’s go.’

He races past you and out the door, the girl quick in his wake.

‘Now look here –’ you start to object, but you have to move quickly to keep up and soon you are racing through the corridors chasing you know-not-what. The thought crosses your mind that the Doctor could be making his escape.

‘Do try and keep up, will you?’ he calls back to you over his

shoulder – putting the lie to that assumption – as he races to a door marked RESTRICTED ACCESS and bursts through into a concrete

bunker adjacent to your lab. You arrive too late to stop him, maybe you don’t even want to, intrigued to know what this strange man of science thinks of your work. Inside, the quintessential Big Dumb Object. The solid mass of enigmatic mineral that you and your team have laboriously collected and shaped over the past year, in

exacting detail, precisely as instructed by those mysterious

blueprints calling to you from across the millennia. Even the Doctor comes up short when he sees it. He drops out of his run to a

standstill, gazes up and down its colossal length, back and forth across its great girth. It sits atop four struts, its shape not quite spherical. More of an oblong, and, despite some pitting and the

precisely etched grooves along its equator and the span from pole to pole, it looks like nothing more than… well, than…

‘I’d certainly hate to meet the chicken that laid that,’ the Doctor begins, with a sly grin.

Which is when the crate crashes down on him, toppling over from

a stack of similar such crates piled just inside the bunker's door, driving the Doctor to the floor. You gasp, as does Sarah Jane, but it's too dark to say for certain Wit fell by accident or was pushed.

'For certain' – words that will come back to haunt you at the trial, when you have thoroughly committed yourself to the Doctor's side.

But let's not skip ahead, because right now Sarah Jane is screaming his name, pushing at the crate and gesturing for you to help her raise it. You might catch a movement at the corner of your eye, but

there's no time to tell what it is. Together, you and the girl manage to push the crate aside, and find the Doctor –

Lying almost peaceable with his arms at his sides. His eyes open and he smiles.

'You're all right!' you say.

'Quite so. A defensive manoeuvre in Venusian aikido,' he

explains. 'Relaxing the bones and muscles in rapid sequence to

cushion the impact. Hard to do and not always successful, but

fortunately the crate wasn't too heavy and I was able to react in time.'

You stand amazed as Sarah Jane helps him to his feet.

65

'I'd say whoever killed your friend has by now made good their

escape,' says the Doctor. 'But maybe we can still find them ifwe work out a motive. I suppose you'd better tell me what this is for.'

He gestures at the object taking up all the space behind him. 'Solid carbonaceous chondrite, if I'm not mistaken.'

'The Egg,' you say, nodding and wondering where to begin when

there is so much to tell. 'Well, it all started when we found a way to decipher the pattern coded into our DNA.'

And that is the inopportune moment when the authorities burst in.

Trials are the same the galaxy over. Never so exciting as they seem to be when dramatised. Long, boring affairs, half impenetrable

legalese and half dumbed-down spoon-feed for the jurors, always

selected to be the least intellectual, least imaginative persons from the prospective pool. Fortunately we don't have to sit through it all again, we can skip ahead to the relevant bits.

There the Doctor sits, in the seat of the accused, looking

relatively comfortable and unconcerned despite the mag-lock

manacles on his wrists and the stern faces all around. You sit with Sarah Jane in one of the front rows, ready to be called upon again as a witness if necessary.

You are still wondering what impulse led you to claim her as

your lab assistant, to keep her out of harm's way when the Doctor was being led away in restraints. Rash and impulsive to trust these strangers, yet their very strangeness, you might even say their

otherworldliness, lends credence to their claims of innocence. The mystery of the Egg makes plenty of your people uncomfortable,

shaking their beliefs and values right down to the core. The Doctor, with all his mystery, seems almost like a doorway to a larger

universe, one where new and better answers might reside. But for some, that's one mystery too many.

There's the Reverend Professor Durgovantillon, your colleague

and rival in all things, so obviously the villain of our piece that there is no point hiding it even at this early stage. Durgovantillon has been nervous about the direction of your research since the start, uncomfortable with peering too closely at the Creator's handiwork, children playing brazenly with the building blocks of their own

creation. He's tried to shut you down more than once, and though you could never prove it, you suspect he's gone so far as to falsify his own findings in several joint projects where the council

mandated you work together for the sake of 'objectivity'. Ah,

Durgovantillon! He gets his fingers into everything, doesn't he?

Little surprise that when this goat court was convened – an

unfortunate necessity for a research station set far from the centre of 66

civilisation for safety purposes – he managed to inveigle himself into the proceedings. But 'Reverend' carries more weight than

'Professor' with so many people these days, the reverse of how you feel it should be, surely. Let's listen to him now.

'You have no identification, no record of citizenship or

employment, no authorisation to be on the premises,'

Durgovantillon orates grandly, 'and yet you expect us to believe that you just happen to have magically materialised right at the scene of a murder? Don't you find that a bit unusual?'

'I suppose so,' says the Doctor, 'though in my case that seems to be the usual unusual. But do carry on...'

Durgovantillon does just that, spinning his entirely circumstantial case against the accused, though he's obviously disgruntled at the Doctor's seeming nonchalance. In fact, the Doctor's very

indifference seems to be playing into his defence, because it's very hard to pin any sort of motive on him for the killing at all when he seems to be innocent of where he is, so ignorant of anything in

recent news and history. It's easy to see in retrospect, hindsight being twenty-twenty and all that, how the Doctor is steering

Durgovantillon towards the question of motive.

'A personal grudge then?'

'I never met the man.'

'Then sabotage. You want to destroy our great work.'

'What on Earth for?'

'Jealousy. Insanity.'

'Ideological differences?'

Durgovantillon's eyes narrow. 'Perhaps,' he concedes, warily.

'Then, supposing I did come here to sabotage your "great work'.

If I fixed it, that would disprove your claim.'

'Fixed it?' the judge asks, interjecting before Durgovantillon can regain control.

'I do have some experience in jiggery-pokery. But let me see if I understand what's going on. You found a record written into your genetic code...'

'What looks like a record,' objects Durgovantillon. 'There are

those of us who aren't convinced the sequence is anything more

than a naturally occurring random combination of genes.'

'With polyalphabetic substitution ciphers?' snaps the Doctor.

'Don't be daft, man, it's obviously artificial, and what's more, it's intended that you can crack it. Still, I could see how it would make the less imaginative nervous. No one likes to wake up and find they might have been someone else's chemistry project.'

'You are talking nonsense, Doctor,' Durgovantillon snaps in

outrage. As he does so, a tiny fleck of saliva flies from his mouth. It 67

hurtles across the courtroom, a tiny wet comet whose arc describes a perfect miniature parabola through the air, before impacting the Doctor on the left cheek.

'I've found that sense and nonsense often depend on your

perspective,' the Doctor replies calmly. He takes a handkerchief from the velvet pocket of his jacket and wipes the saliva from his face with exaggerated care. But instead of returning the

handkerchief to his breast pocket, he slips it down into the pocket of his trousers. 'But if I may? So you – not you specifically but your colleagues –' and at this the Doctor nods in your direction, 'set about to unravel the code. Which when decoded turns out to be a

complex set of blueprints, instructing you to build that Egg you have locked up in the lab. But what does it do? I didn't notice any moving

parts, and it seems to be completely solid.'

'It is. Solid. It just sits there. It does nothing. It was never designed to do anything.' Durgovantillon is shaking now, his calm facade broken.

'Perhaps,' says the Doctor, a look of concentration suddenly

coming over his face. 'But the instructions were fairly clear, and the Egg isn't complicated enough for you to have assembled it

incorrectly given your level of technical competence. No, I'd say that something is preventing it doing what it's supposed to.

Something, but what?'

That is, of course, the question.

Later, when the trial has recessed for the day, you are alone with Sarah Jane in your lab, her concern for the Doctor infectious: 'Bring me up to speed on what's going on,' she says. 'Tell me more about your research.'

'Certainly,' you say, glad to have something to talk about you

understand. 'The genome is essentially the whole hereditary

information of an organism. It's made up of about 2.9 billion

components in our case, but only about three per cent of it goes into making a person who they are.'

'And the rest?' Sarah Jane asks.

'Just junk. Gibberish. Leftover bits perhaps.'

'Ninety-seven per cent. That's an awful lot of useless gibberish.'

'Indeed. We thought we might use all that extra room to store

information, write codes inside our own genetic material, as a way of preserving knowledge against the ages.'

Sarah Jane nods. 'Only someone got there first.'

'Precisely. Naturally, we were stunned, some of us more than

others.'

‘Durgovantillon.’

68

‘Not happy. But it couldn’t be helped. There was a message staring us in the face from our own biological past. We had to decode it.’

‘And when you did,’ she prompts.

‘It told us to build that – the Egg.’ You gesture to the huge object.

‘Out of carbonaceous chondrite.’

‘Yes,’ you say.

‘But the Doctor says that’s not common on this planet. It’s mostly found in space rock.’

‘In meteors, yes. It took us most of the year to gather enough of it to build the Egg.’

‘And when you did – nothing happened. Did you make a mistake?’

‘No,’ you say, and of this you are certain. ‘We followed the measurements exactly. Whatever it’s supposed to be, this is it.’

‘Well, it must do something,’ Sarah Jane says, getting up to pace around the Egg. ‘I can’t imagine that whoever went to all the trouble of asking you to build it just wanted to play a practical joke.’

‘Certainly not. Especially when they’d be a few million years waiting on a punch line.’

You both stare at the Egg in silence a moment.

‘Could it have a religious significance? Some form of art?’ she asks. ‘Maybe. But not to us. And again, why go to all the trouble?’

‘Then it must do something. And as the Doctor said, since it isn’t doing

whatever it does, something's not working as it should.' She walks around the Egg again, staring up at it with a scientist's

interest. Or maybe a journalist's. 'And maybe if we can get it

working, we can convince them the Doctor had nothing to do with

any attempted sabotage. Just as he suggests.'

You suddenly realise you are warming to this strange visitor,

caught up together as you are in the mystery. But we don't have to sit through the frustrating night of looking for answers and not finding them again. We can skip away elsewhere.

Now pay special attention here. You've not seen this bit before.

We're going to look in on the Doctor in his cell. You weren't there for this first time around. He's alone in a bare room – hastily

constructed from a storage area to serve as a lock-up. It wouldn't hold him if he seriously set about to escape. Knowing the Doctor, it wouldn't hold him if he unseriously set about it either. But that's presuming he has somewhere else he'd rather be. In truth, I rather suspect some peace and privacy is exactly what he craves right now.

See? He glances around the room slyly, making sure he isn't

being observed. Satisfied that he is not – and by this I mean by any of your kind at the time and not our current retroactive surveillance

– he settles down upon the sole chair in the room and fishes around in his pocket.

And brings out his handkerchief.

He glances up, then. My – it's almost as if he is looking right at us. But that couldn't be possible.

And he smiles.

Let's peek back in on your laboratory, to the time when Sarah Jane suddenly looks up and asks: 'When did you finish building the

Egg?'

‘It was completed over a week ago,’ you answer. ‘We’ve been

poring over the code again, to see if we missed something.’

‘And?’

‘Not that we can see.’

‘Interesting,’ she muses.

‘Why?’

‘Because in that case whoever killed your man Professor Silliams didn’t do it to prevent him finishing the Egg.’

‘No. It was quite finished.’

Sarah Jane nods and grins.

‘Then that begs a question. What did they kill him to prevent him from doing?’

Your colleague’s body has long since been removed from the lab,

the blood stains scrubbed away, but everything else is pretty much as it was. The sample of leftover carbonaceous chondrite is still in its tray, the equipment undisturbed. You spend several fruitless hours staring at everything but nothing seems out of the ordinary. It is your lab, as you left it, as it always is. It is at once homely and familiar and now, strange and terrifying. Oh what a difference a few days can make. You agree, I know, but of course you would now,

wouldn’t you?

The Doctor’s odd blue box sits in a corner, unmoving, possibly

faintly humming, giving off an almost palpable air that it is

patiently waiting for his return. He may be innocent of Silliams’

murder, but there’s no denying that he arrived and the world

changed. Or the world changed and he arrived. Which came first,

the Egg or the...

But back in our story, you jump when Sarah Jane hefts the sonic

destabiliser, testing its weight in her small hand.

‘Sorry,’ she shrugs. And starts to set the device back down. Then she looks at it again, and asks, ‘So the killer used this as a club.’

70

‘A pretty effective one,’ you say.

‘But what does it do again?’

‘It evaporates metals. Minerals, ores and alloys. It’s used to cut and shape them in hands-off operations where molecular precision is required.’

‘So why hit someone over the head with it? Why not use it on

them?’

‘The sonics are only effective on metals and ores. It won’t work on flesh. It’s not calibrated to work in that range.’

‘And I suppose it hasn’t been tampered with. It’s still set for

carbonous – carbonious –’

‘Carbonaceous chondrite, yes.’ You look down at the dial.

Something catches your attention. ‘Now wait, that’s odd,’ you say.

‘What do you see?’

‘The dial has been reset. It’s not tuned to carbonaceous chondrite at all, but to common carbon steel.’

‘Steel?’

‘Yes, and, in fact, at these settings you could melt a good deal of it.’

Sarah Jane looks around at the lab, polished tiles and concrete

walls. ‘There’s no steel here,’ she says.

‘No,’ you agree. ‘The settings must have jarred when the blow

was struck.’

How wrong you are.

Ah, it embarrasses you now, does it? To see the door open before you and know you turned from walking through. Don't be hard on

yourself. Our story's not quite done, and there's still time for you to see the light.

Which brings us back to the second day of the trial, where we find the Doctor even more nonchalant than before. Why, he even seems

to be whistling to himself as the slings and arrows are cast about him. Or is it really to h *imself*?

Durgovantillon is in fine form. Although his case against the

Doctor is entirely circumstantial, the presence of an unidentified stranger – and an aloof one at that – appearing so conveniently at the time of a murder is hard to discount. It would be nicer if the Doctor appeared to take the proceedings seriously, but for people wanting to get on with it and return to their lives, he presents a simple enough answer.

'Could you please pay attention?' Durgovantillon almost shouts,

exasperated.

'What?' says the Doctor, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think my input was necessary. You seem to be working your way towards a

forgone conclusion fine enough without me.'

And then he goes right on whistling. He seems oblivious to

everything as the proceedings continue, though if he notices

anything in the room it's Sarah Jane. The Doctor seems as if he's whistling straight to her. But what he means, she can't quite decide.

And then, as the hours wear on, she finds herself humming along.

'Da da da da...'

'What's that you're humming?' you ask.

'Pardon?' Sarah Jane says, unconscious of what she's been doing.

She plays the melody back in her mind, trying to catch at a snatch of it.

‘ *Da da da da*...something, something... *the ice is slowly melting...* ’

‘Ice?’ you say, as she murmurs about it having been years since

something has been clear. You obviously don’t recognise the

melody–how could you? – and I do wonder what the Time Lord’s

glossolalia has done with the lyrics of alien pop music. But while the reference can’t hold any meaning for you in translation, Sarah Jane suddenly smiles.

‘I know how to make the Egg work,’ she whispers to you. ‘Come

on, “Little Darling”.’ And with that incongruous remark, she pulls you out of the courtroom, as inconspicuously as possible but

Durgovantillon pauses in his oration, frowns. It can’t be helped but, as you know, he won’t be important for much longer.

Right now you race across the grounds, out of the communal

buildings where the goat court has been assembled, back to the lab, both keenly aware that the Doctor’s time is drawing to a close. The trial is winding down and your people are known for swift justice when they feel they have better things to do.

‘The sonic destabiliser,’ Sarah Jane explains. ‘Its dial wasn’t

misaligned by the blow.’

‘But I don’t understand,’ you gasp as you run to keep up, your

scientific lifestyle obviously no match for the aerobic workout that adventuring with the Doctor must be. ‘It wasn’t set for

carbonaceous chondrite.’

‘Wasn’t meant to be,’ Sarah Jane replies as you reach the lab and rush in. ‘Your colleague had it set exactly as he meant it.’

‘For steel?’ you ask. The two of you reach the lab and Sarah Jane picks up the destabilise; looks down to make sure the settings

haven't changed. 'Exactly.' Then she marches out of the lab and

down the corridor to the room where the Egg waits patiently, all alone with its potential. She opens the doorway on its bulk, but doesn't step inside, nor move away so you can do so. Then she

raises the sonic destabiliser.

'Carbon steel. Common.' She announces.

'But there isn't any in the Egg,' you reply, still puzzled.

'The Egg isn't the target.' She points the destabiliser at the wall.

And that's when you realise. The concrete of the walls. Threaded throughout with rebar, reinforcing steel that is routinely cast into almost all concrete to carry the tensile loads. A great steel cage threaded throughout the Egg's bunker.

Lending it support.

And Sarah Jane is about to press a button and evaporate it all.

'Better stand back,' she says with a grin. 'Here comes the sun!'

She presses the button.

For a moment nothing happens and you almost relax. And then an

ear-splintering crack. And the walls come down.

You are both driven back by the dust, the huge slabs of masonry

that crash and crumble around you. Small stones pelt your face.

But as the smoke clears you see the Egg, unharmed, shining in

the sun above the debris. A phoenix from the ashes.

At first, you think the humming you hear is simply a ringing in

your ears, but then it grows in intensity, a loud, resonating thrum that builds and builds and builds. And as it does, colours appear in the surface of the Egg. Tiny flecks of light at first, they swell and burst like fireworks. The struts fall away, shaken loose by the

growing vibrations, but the Egg hovers impossibly in the air. And now the rumbling is too loud to ignore; the surface of the Egg a riot of light. Peculiar shapes dance within, a glimpse of a churning

vortex outside the walls of the known.

The blast explodes outward in all directions at once, a concentric circle of white light that washes through you and Sarah Jane and everything, but you neither feel the impact nor notice any change in its wake.

And then the Egg is gone.

And in it's place, a hole in the fabric of reality. A gap in

everything that hovers in the air in front of you like a rip in all directions at once, like a miniature black hole, and you're at a loss to tell if it is curiosity or something more tactile that calls to you from beneath its surface. But the pull is real. And very strong. Can you remember what you felt like then?

The courtroom has come rushing out to witness the miracle, drawn no doubt by the noise and the sight of the strange explosion, which must have rushed through them moments after it did you. They

come racing across the grounds, slowing when they reach the edge of the rubble, until they come to stand in a circle, gaping, faced with much larger concerns than the trial against the Doctor. He takes the sonic destabiliser from Sarah Jane and no one bats an eye when he 73

uses it to pop the mag-lock manacles off his wrists.

'What have you done?' Durgovantillon demands, and he is

addressing the Doctor and not Sarah Jane. Of everyone present, he is the only one whose awe seems tempered with fear and rage.

'What have you done?' he screams again.

'Why, Sarah Jane has fixed your broken Egg,' the Doctor says,

smiling. 'So much for all the king's horses and all the king's men.

All it took was one very resourceful young woman.'

'And one Doctor,' she smiles back at him.

‘But you mustn’t, you mustn’t,’ Durgovantillon calls out ‘We’re

not ready for this! We like things just the way they are! If you hadn’t come blundering in, no one would have been the wiser. The Egg didn’t work and it would have stayed that way.’

‘But your colleague Professor Silliams worked it out,’ says the

Doctor icily. ‘He was about to expose it to the outside air just as Sarah Jane has done.’

‘He had to be stopped,’ Durgovantillon says, almost as if

justifying the act to himself. ‘He couldn’t see reason. He wouldn’t see reason. He had to be stopped. And now, you’ve gone and made

his sacrifice useless. Useless...’

He is broken now, hardly resists as he is led away, his face a

mask of horror as he looks at the yawning portal the Egg has

become, a doorway into a world too wide for his limited

imagination.

You watch them take him away, then turn back to the Doctor.

‘How did you know?’

‘The Egg had to serve some function. So it was a case of figuring out what could be interfering with it. The setting on the

destabiliser’s dial was a clue. The steel rebar in the concrete of the bunker formed a mesh, essentially acting as what Sarah Jane knows as a Faraday cage.’

‘Of course,’ you say, ‘a framework of conducting material that

blocks electrical fields. We use small ones in the lab all the time to screen out electromagnetic interference.’

‘It’s why portable radios won’t work in a lift,’ the Doctor

explains helpfully, though you aren’t sure what a ‘lift’ is. No fault of your own. Your people build out, not up. But I digress...

‘Anything inside the bunker would be shielded from external

electromagnetic radiation,’ you continue.

‘And thus cut off from possible detection.’

‘Detection?’ you ask.

‘Well, naturally. The Egg didn’t do anything on its own, but what you didn’t realise is that its very existence – the concentration of so much rare and refined carbonaceous chondrite in one place on an

oxygen world – would itself be significant. That much

carbonaceous chondrite in one place could only be deliberate.’

And then the Doctor begins to tell our story.

Imagine, if you will, a progenitor civilisation at the beginning of time. All (or mostly) alone way back when, before the galaxy

became the busy, crowded place it is today. We wanted (or needed) company, and we weren’t going to find it any time soon. But needs must. So we seeded our DNA throughout the galaxy, set it flying

around on comets and in probes, insinuating itself into the junk space in the genomes of all the primordial soups we encountered on infant planets scattered the and wide. And in the DNA, we hid a

message. A blueprint for how to gather and refine carbonaceous

chondrite, an element very common in space but rare on oxygen

planets. And then we calibrated our instruments and set them to

scanning all of space, and we gave them all of time to do it. We weren’t worried. We built our instruments to last. We built our

instruments to outlast us, in fact, by millions of years. We reasoned that one day our children would come along and decode our

message, and when we detected Eggs we’d know that the

civilisation that constructed them was both intelligent enough to unlock the code in their genes and sufficiently space-fazing to be able

to gather enough chondrite to construct an Egg. And when we found such a civilisation –

'It triggers the opening of a wormhole between the Egg and a

planet at the early days of this galaxy,' the Doctor explains. 'Basic, one-way time corridor technology. Not as versatile as the All

Access Pass you'd get with a TARDIS, of course, but perfectly

sufficient if you wanted to send a one-way invitation to your

descendants to pop round and say hello to the old ancestors.'

'But, how do you know all this?' you ask.

'Educated guesswork, at first,' the Doctor explains. 'But then I took a look at your DNA myself.'

'How? Where did you get a sample?'

For an answer, the Doctor pulls out his handkerchief from his

trouser pocket. 'Helpfully provided by the most unhelpful Reverend Professor Durgovantillon. An ideal sample of Valdamarian genetic code, even if donated by a less than ideal Valdamarian.'

'Is that why you were trying so hard to provoke him?' you ask,

but the Doctor ignores the question.

'With a little time and a little privacy, it was only the work of a few moments to decipher the second code,' he says, with what you are learning is characteristic immodesty.

'Second code?'

'The invitation accompanying the blueprint.'

'An invitation,' you gasp, no doubt dizzy under the weight of so much happening so fast.

'To hammer the point home,' says the Doctor. 'Because what else

would you call a great big hole into the past hovering right square in

front of you? Doorways are meant for walking through.' He turns his gaze on the gateway then, and for a moment his eyes narrow. The more you know of him, the more frightening that look becomes. 'You don't have to go through, of course.'

'We don't? But our ancestors – our parents...'

'Perhaps. But they didn't say they originated your genome, only that they influenced it. That would make them anything from meddling interlopers to spiritual uncles. And anything could be waiting for you. The galaxy was a rough place back then. Red in tooth and claw. It still is. I can't tell you what waits for you on the other side of that portal, only that ifyou and your people choose to go through it, your planet will never be the same. You'll be taking your place on a cosmic stage.'

'What would you do, Doctor?' you ask, trembling in the wake of such a monumental decision. 'Would you go through the door?'

The Doctor begins to answer, then he shakes his head and smiles.

'I can't answer those questions for you. You'll have to make your own decisions.' And with that, he offers his arm to his companion with an inviting glance.

'So soon?' she sighs

'High time we were off,' he replies. 'But who knows, we might even pop back and see how these things started.' The thought gives me chills, I'll admit.

'Goodbye,' Sarah Jane calls to you as she is led away. Then she disengages from the Doctor's grasp and runs back to you.

'Good luck,' she says sincerely, and she takes your hand like a friend. You realise that's what she is.

‘It will be a big decision,’ you are saying now. ‘To meet one’s

creators... even if they aren’t the threat Durgovantillon imagined.’

‘Especially if they aren’t,’ she agrees. ‘The Doctor is right. It really will change everything. Like growing up and leaving the nest.

Still, you know what they say, “You can’t make an omelette...”‘

You laugh together, and in that laughter, some portion of your

fear is mitigated.

And then they are gone, and as the peculiar grating sound of their ship fades in your ears you turn and stare again at the great,

yawning portal to destiny that hangs before you. And you can see already the wonder and curiosity as it begins to take shape on your face, as you gaze up and into the time corridor.

We can see it all now that the Egg is free. Once activated by our 76

machines, it shows us everything, backwards and forwards from the start of our tale to this pivotal moment. We have watched it again and again. We can see your hesitation at war with your curiosity, your tradition with your sense of excitement, your comfortable past with your uncertain future. Look at you now, pondering the

numinous. Will you take that step into destiny? Will you join us at the start of all things? Will you leave the nest? What will you do?

Of course, we both know how the story ends.

77

Lonely

Richard Wright

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

*** Topic of areyoulonely

Welcome to the Are You Lonely chat room.

1 user online: IamI

*** Faceless43 has entered channel #areyoulonely. 2 users online.

<Faceless43> Hey.

<Faceless43> Hey there.

<Faceless43> How you doing?

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> Shy, huh? That's cool. I'm just glad I'm not the first one in. The irony would kill me.

<Faceless43> You know?

<Faceless43> Being the only person in a chat room for the lonely? I'd throw my hands up, call the universe the winner.

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> Got to tell you though, I'm kind of waiting for the tumbleweeds to roll on by. You get tumbleweeds in cyberspace?

<Faceless43> You going to say anything?

<IamI> hello

<Faceless43> Yeah, hello. Been there already. Keep up.

<IamI> r u lonely?

<Faceless43> Sure. That's why I'm here.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> Can't begin to imagine why.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Pretty desperate case, aren't you? Where you from?

<IamI> i am here

<Faceless43> You know, maybe I preferred the stony silence.

*** Shirley1968 has entered channel #areyoulonely. 3 users online.

<Faceless43> Hey there, how you doing?

<Shirley1968> Hello. Okay WI join you?

<Faceless43> Makes me happier than you can imagine. Been here before?

<Shirley1968> It's not exactly the first place Google brings up.

<Faceless43> Tried a few others first, right?

<Shirley1968> I did. They're very busy. Everybody knows each other. It always feels like being new at a youth club, standing in the corner waiting for somebody to take pity on you. I'm too old for that sort of thing.

<Faceless43> You keep coming online though. You keep on looking.

<Shirley1968> Yes.

<Faceless43> What for?

<Shirley1968> I don't know. Just voices, I think. Company.

<Faceless43> Yeah. I get that.

<IamI> r u lonely?

<Faceless43> Say hello to the welcoming committee.

<Shirley1968> Welcoming committee?

<Faceless43> Never mind.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Shirley1968> Why? Do you mind if I ask?

<Faceless43> I could take a guess.

<IamI> i am lonely don't stop typing

<Shirley1968> That's mean.

<Faceless43> Okay, okay. What about you? Why are you lonely?

<Shirley1968> I live alone. It's sort of complicated.

<Faceless43> Hey, if you can't unburden yourself to two total strangers in an anonymous chatroom, where can you?

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Shirley1968> Thanks, but we've only just met.

<Faceless43> We've never met. Never going to. That's sort of the point, right?

<Shirley1968> I suppose.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Good advice.

<Shirley1968> I had a husband and a baby boy. I don't any more.

They left. I'm alone.

<Shirley1968> I'm not explaining this very well.

<Faceless43> He took your kid?

<Shirley1968> He had to. I couldn't cope.

<Shirley1968> And the house is empty when I come home. It's maddening. I need voices.

<Faceless43> I got voices all around me. Work all day in a call centre, come home at night to roommates I got nothing in common

with, go back to work the next day. I speak to hundreds of people, but don't really talk to any of them. Make any sense?

<Shirley1968> That's horrible.

<Faceless43> Says you. After yours, I feel dumb even mentioning it.

<Shirley1968> Don't.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> So you keep saying buddy.

<Shirley1968> Why are you so lonely?

<IamI> i am the only one i am smaller don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Witness the fine line between lonely and needy.

<IamI> don't stop typing

*** Nicky has entered channel #areyoulonely. 4 users online.

<Shirley1968> Hello Nicky.

<Faceless43> Hey Nick.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Nicky> Hi everyone.

<Faceless43> Welcome to the party. BYOEC.

<Nicky> I don't know that one.

<Faceless43> Bring Your Own Existential Crisis. Think it'll catch on?

<Shirley1968> Ignore him. He thinks he's funny.

<Nicky> No, it was good.

<Faceless43> You humour me. I like you.

<Shirley1968> So what about you Nicky? Why are you here?

<Faceless43> Jeez. Let the guy settle in first.

<Shirley1968> How do you know it's not a girl?

<Nicky> I just saw the link. Thought I'd give it a try.

<Faceless43> No need to be shy. Let me summarise where we're at.

<Faceless43> I feel lonely in a crowd.

<Faceless43> Shirley can't stand having nobody at home.

<Faceless43> We don't have the faintest idea what IamI's problem is, but he sure does have one.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> See? It's like an intuition with me. Scary. So what's your beef?

<Nicky> I have somebody at home.

<Shirley1968> Good. Everybody should have that.

<Nicky> Sometimes they scare me.

<Faceless43> Why?

<Nicky> Sometimes they hurt me.

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> Come again?

80

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Like the guy says. Hurt you how?

<Nicky> It's for my own good.

<Nicky> I have to be punished.

<Shirley1968> How old are you Nicky?

<Nicky> Twelve.

<Faceless43> jeez.

<Shirley1968> Who hurts you?

<Nicky> .

<Faceless43> Come on kid, who hurts you?

<Nicky> I'm not allowed to tell. I'll be in trouble.

<Shirley1968> Then tell us where you live. We can help.

<Nicky> My teachers told me not to give out my address online.

<Faceless43> Look, sure, they're right, okay? But this

<Faceless43> This isn't the same thing.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> Other things going on right now buddy, okay?

DrLuvin has entered channel #areyoulonely. 5 users online.

<Faceless43> Perfect timing.

<Nicky> Hi.

<DrLuvin> Can I come and play?

<Shirley1968> You picked a bad moment.

<Faceless43> Nicky, stick around, okay? Don't go nowhere.

<Nicky> Okay.

<DrLuvin> Don't mind me, you boys do your thing.

<DrLuvin> All the same to me. I'm open-minded.

<DrLuvin> So, what's happening with you, Shirl?

<Shirley1968> Not much.

<DrLuvin> Cool. Field's open.

<DrLuvin> Outstanding.

<DrLuvin> So.

<DrLuvin> What are you wearing?

<DrLuvin> .

<Shirley1968> I beg your pardon?

<DrLuvin> What are you wearing? Something cute? Something slinky? It's something slinky, yes? I love slinky.

<Faceless43> Wow.

<Faceless43> Buddy, do you ever have the wrong chat room.

<DrLuvin> What?

<Shirley1968> We're not here for

<Shirley1968> You know.

<Shirley1968> Whatever you had in mind.

81

<Faceless43> And did we mention that Nicky's twelve?

<DrLuvin> Twelve?

<DrLuvin> Oh god.

<DrLuvin> Oh god, I'm so sorry.

<DrLuvin> Really, I saw the name of the chatroom, and I

<DrLuvin> I'm so embarrassed.

<Shirley1968> Don't worry about it.

<DrLuvin> SO embarrassed.

<Faceless43> Don't sweat it buddy. You made my night.

<Nicky> Me too. You're funny.

<Shirley1968> I wish I'd dressed for the occasion.

<Faceless43> LOL. Listen, don't get me wrong, but we were kind of in the middle of something.

<DrLuvin> Hey, no problem. Not a problem at all. My humiliation and I will take our leave.

<Nicky> I should go too.

<Shirley1968> WAIT

<Shirley1968> Nicky, wait. We need to talk.

<DrLuvin> How do you log out of this thing then?

<Faceless43> Just click the log out doohickey.

<DrLuvin> It's not working.

<DrLuvin> Nothing is.

<Faceless43> So close the window already. Little x in the top right of the screen. Can't miss it.

<Faceless43> You still here?

<DrLuvin> I can't find it. Look, I know this sounds strange, but I can't see it.

<Nicky> I can't log out either. Everything's gone.

<DrLuvin> I can't see the window.

<Faceless43> Gone? What are you talking about?

<Nicky> I don't know where I am.

<DrLuvin> I can't see the window, and I can't see the button to log out, and I can't see my hands.

<Faceless43> ?

<Shirley1968> I can't either. Can you see your hands? Or the screen?

<Faceless43> Course I can see them. How else

<Faceless43> how

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> No.

<Faceless43> I don't see anything at all.

<Faceless43> What's happening?

<Nicky> My hands are gone, and so are my eyes, and so is my body.

<Faceless43> Kid, you're freaking me out.

<Shirley1968> Look for yourself. I don't know where I am! There's nothing but

<Shirley1968> Nothing but your words. You're just

<Nicky> I've got to get back! They'll hurt me!

<Faceless43> Wait up. Everybody just take a second here.

<Shirley1968> It's as though I've been cut out of my body. I'm here, and there are words that are you, and I don't know how to get back.

I've got no hands, and no mouse, and there's no screen with a

window to close, there's just this space, and I think I'm crying somewhere.

<Faceless43> Everybody relax, okay? Okay? We can figure this out.

You're crying somewhere, see?

<DrLuvin> I don't want to play these games! It's not what I'm into!

Just give me back my body, and I won't go to the police, okay? I won't tell the police.

<DrLuvin> Okay?

<DrLuvin> I PROMISE I WON'T TELL THE POLICE

<Faceless43> LISTEN, if Shirley's crying somewhere, then it's got to be her body doing it! She's still there somewhere. So are my hands.

Somewhere, my hands are still on my arms.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> My

<Faceless43> Wait up. IamI. Can you see your hands?

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> Your hands. Can you see your goddam hands!

<IamI> i am i

<Shirley1968> Are you doing this?

<Faceless43> ARE YOU DOING THIS

<IamI> u r here

<Shirley1968> Tell us what's happening!

<IamI> u r here don't stop typing

<DrLuvin> What does that mean! What happens if we stop! Who ARE you?

Jsmith8 has entered channel #areyoulonely. 6 users online.

<Jsmith8> Finally! There you are! Why on earth did you wander off like that? Do you have any idea how many of these chat things I've been through looking for you? Well? Do you?

<Shirley1968> Out! Get out!

<Nicky> Out mr, you've got to go!

<Faceless43> Buddy, there's no time to explain, just log out, right now!

<DrLuvin> TAKE ME WITH YOU WHERE ARE MY HANDS

<Jsmith8> Where you left them I imagine. What a peculiar question.

Don't stop typing, by the way.

<Shirley1968> What? Why do you people keep saying that?

<Jsmith8> Oh, it's such a chore to explain. There are, you know, algorithms and the like. You've been in a chat room before?

<Shirley1968> Of course...

<Jsmith8> Well, come on then! What happens when you sit too long without typing?

<Nicky> The system sees you're inactive, boots you out of the chat.

<Jsmith8> Excellent Nicky! I'm glad to see somebody brought a functioning bag of faculties with them.

<Faceless43> But that's what we want. We stop typing, and we get the hell out of here!

<Jsmith8> Sorry, no, you're exactly one hundred per cent, wrong.

You think that's what you want, but it really, really isn't.

<Jsmith8> Ah. I've just lost my hands.

<Jsmith8> That's rather unpleasant, isn't it? The dislocation.

Knowing they should be there, might still be there somewhere, but having no connection to them at all.

<Shirley1968> Please. I can't take this.

<Jsmith8> Sorry. You've been coaxed out of your body – don't ask me how, we don't have the time. If you could log off normally, and you can't, you would follow the path back to your flesh, where you would be gently deposited, right as a trivet. You would be in control.

Being kicked out is

<Jsmith8> Violent. Directionless. The chances of hitting your own body are astronomically small.

<Jsmith8> And if you miss

<Jsmith8> Well wherever you lay your hat, and all that

<Jsmith8> Just don't stop typing.

<Shirley1968> .

<DrLuvin> ... ...

<Nicky> .

<Faceless43> Are you doing this?

<Jsmith8> Me? Hardly. Nice internet you have here, by the way. Web 2.0, is it? Or are you on to 3? It all goes downhill after that, I'm afraid.

<Nicky> Downhill?

<Jsmith8> Web 3.6. Barry, it likes to call itself. Huge inferiority complex, deeply attention seeking, sociopathic in ways that only an artificial intelligence can achieve. Causes all sorts of problems. You'll get through it.

<Jsmith8> Well, your species will, at any rate.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Jsmith8> Hush. Not now. I'm mid-adumbration.

<Faceless43> He's doing it. Whatever's happening, he's doing it. He stole my hands and eyes.

<Jsmith8> Oh ho, yes, there go the eyes, right on cue. There's no screen any more of course, and without my hands and the mouse...

yes, I'm completely trapped here with you, hanging in cyberspace like a sad digital wraith. The claustrophobia's no fun at all, is it? There's nothing, everywhere, crushing through you even though there is no you for it to crush.

<Nicky> Are you here to help?

<Jsmith8> Of course I am! That's what I do. Over and over again.

This is bit of a change, though.

<Jsmith8> Usually, there are corridors. And running. If you feel yourself edging towards despair, just thank your lucky stars that you're not running along corridors.

<Nicky> I don't have much time! How are we going to get out of here?

<DrLuvin> HELP US GET US OUT OF HERE FOR PITY'S SAKE

HELP US

<Jsmith8> Ah.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Jsmith8> Oh dear.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Jsmith8> There seems to have been a small misunderstanding. I'm not here to help you.

<Jsmith8> I'm here to help IamI.

<Shirley1968> .

<Jsmith8> Perhaps I should leave, come back in, start over.

<Jsmith8> Oh, that's right, no way to log out. Well, this is awkward.

<Faceless43> Him? You're here to help HIM? What about US?

<Jsmith8> In the long run, I'm helping you too. Sort of

<Nicky> What is he? IamI?

<IamI> i am i

<IamI> lonely

<Jsmith8> Both true. It's lost, and alone, and very much smaller than it's used to being.

<Faceless43> It? It's an it? I'm in here with an it?

<Jsmith8> An artificial intelligence. It used to run a starship.

<DrLuvin> I'M STUCK IN A CHATROOM WITH AN ALIEN

AND I DON'T KNOW WHERE MY HANDS ARE

<Nicky> Why is it here?

<Jsmith8> Now THAT'S a good question. Well done Nicky, you're asking all the right things.

<Jsmith8> It used to tend to the needs and wants of the creatures who 85

built the ship, a vast, biotechnological intelligence. An automated supernanny, if you like.

<Jsmith8> Its masters wanted you. They came here, not so long ago, to your world, in their clever, loyal ship.

<Jsmith8> There was a

<Jsmith8> An incident.

<Jsmith8> They died, vaporised instantly for the most part. Some

were a little more belligerent, but it's all taken care of now Nothing for you to worry about.

<Nicky> You killed them.

<Jsmith8> An unsavoury side effect of stopping them from devouring your species, actually. When I destroyed the ship, IamI fled to the largest local repository it could find. Your internet.

<Jsmith8> You wouldn't know now, but IamI used to be rather good company. It's lobotomised itself to squeeze into this cyberspace, and now it's trying to fulfil its programming.

<Shirley1968> That's all it wants? People to look after?

<Jsmith8> Yes. It's my fault. I have to fix it.

<DrLuvin> So set it free, let it go, let us go, PLEASE PLEASE LET

US GO LET US

<Jsmith8> Even if I could, where would it go? My TARDIS could hold it, but there are already more intelligences in there than I'm comfortable with.

<DrLuvin> What are you talking about! Tell me where my HANDS

ARE!!!

<Jsmith8> Oh, shush. There's only one solution. You stay here and keep it company.

<Faceless43> Are you nuts? We can't stay here!

<Jsmith8> Why not? You already live on the edges of your own lives, hiding away, wandering a pretend world without touching anybody.

Even with your whole species connected by wires, able to reach each other across an entire world at the click of a mouse, you still choose to make loneliness an art form! IamI hasn't trapped you. You trapped yourselves.

<Faceless43> You son of a

<Jsmith8> It's an elegant solution, in say so myself. IamI gets the company it needs, and stays safely tucked into this corner of the web.

At the same time, none of you will have to fear the silence in your heads again. Ever.

<Jsmith8> That doesn't sound so bad, does it?

<DrLuvin> I DON'T WANT TO STAY I WANT TO SEE MY

HANDS DON'T GIVE US TO PT

<Jsmith8> Too late. What do you say, IamI? Do you agree?

<IamI> not enough they r not enough

<Jsmith8> How many did I take away from you? A hundred? A

thousand?

<IamI> i want more

<Jsmith8> Of course you do. Would you like me to get them for you?

<Shirley1968> What are you doing?

<Jsmith8> Making amends. I can bring a thousand more, just like you. The lost and lonely. The disaffected. The sad and sadder.

<IamI> yes

<Nicky> NO! You can't!

<Jsmith8> You should see my address book. I think I can find enough who fit the profile, who need the help. But IamI, you have to set me free, do you understand? You have to let me go.

<IamI> why

<Jsmith8> Oh, tyrants to quash, wrongs to right, souls to save. I'm all booked up, basically.

<Nicky> Please

<Jsmith8> See the bigger picture, Nicky. You'll be guardians, keeping it sated, saving the world. Can you imagine what IamI could wreak, in its loneliness? The needs of the many outweigh the needs of

the few.

<Jsmith8> I met him once. Splendid chap.

<Faceless43> Spock?

<Jsmith8> Nimoy.

<DrLuvin> I'M BEGGING YOU PLEASE DON'T GO

<Jsmith8> IamI, I'm ready. I need the administrator permissions for this chatroom, so I can send the invites by email. This place will fill up tout de suite.

<IamI> i will not be lonely

<Jsmith8> Give it a few years, and you'll be releasing people just to hear yourself think.

<Faceless43> Come on buddy, we can about talk this.

<Shirley1968> You have to give us a chance!

<Jsmith8> Life did that already, over and again, but you ran away.

<Nicky> Will we be safe? Will it hurt me?

<Jsmith8> Yes, and no.

<Nicky> That's okay then.

<Shirley1968> Nicky!

<Nicky> I want to stay with you. Please?

<Faceless43> Kid

<Jsmith8> Too late. IamI?

<IamI> adding ur profile

<Jsmith8> Jolly good.

<IamI> profile added

<Jsmith8> You're kidding me. Really?

<Jsmith8> So it is. Excellent!

<Jsmith8> Time to get to work then.

<IamI> i will not be lon >>@&

<IamI> &&#@///

<IamI> (*£>>?@}]]]^!*

<Jsmith8> Oops, sorry about that. With you in a minute.

<IamI> &^?ffi##^($”Y^

<IamI> ?%anged

<IamI> changed

<DrLuvin> WHAT CHANGED WHAT DID YOU WHAT’S

CHANGED!!!!

<Jsmith8> Incredible place this, don’t you think? A world within a world, a reality where nothing exists but lines of code, manipulating the fabric of the place in infmite ways. Words are power here. You just need the right ones. A death ago, I used to fantasise about changing reality with a well-turned phrase.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Jsmith8> Yes.

<IamI> don’t let them go

<Jsmith8> Sorry. You have no right to them. They are not yours to tend.

<Faceless43> What? You’re letting us go? What?

<Jsmith8> Of course I am, I just needed those admin powers. What?

You didn’t

<Jsmith8> Good heavens, I can’t blame IamI for falling for it – it only has half a mind to work with! The rest of you though... I mean, how transparent was that? It wasn’t even a double bluff, just a single one!

Nicky's twelve, and he knew I was bluffing.

<Nicky> I didn't.

<Jsmith8> But you said

<Jsmith8> Oh.

<Jsmith8> That bad, is it?

<Nicky> I just wanted to be free.

<Jsmith8> Nicky, Nicky, there's no freedom in hiding away.

<IamI> u cannot free them

<Jsmith8> You can't stop me. Your little linguistic glitch back there was me taking your admin powers off you. You're trapped, just like everybody else.

<Jsmith8> I have the power now.

<DrLuvin> PLEASE I can't take any more of this I promise I PROMISE I'LL BE GOOD

<Jsmith8> I hope so. You might want to reconsider your approach to dating, by the way.

<DrLuvin> YES anything anything just let me GO

<Jsmith8> Gladly. DrLuvin has left the chat

*** DrLuvin has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 5 users online.

<JSmith8> Back to the flesh you go.

<IamI> stop

<Faceless43> Wait! Is he in his body?

<Jsmith8> Of course he is. He's perfectly well, and no doubt enjoying the full use of his hands. Nicky?

<Nicky> What?

<Jsmith8> When you get back, stay in your room. There will be a

knock at the door shortly. Nobody will hurt you tonight.

<Nicky> I'll be in trouble!

<Jsmith8> No, you won't Trouble's coming, but not for you. Nicky has left the chat.

*** Nicky has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 4 users online.

<IamI> stop this

<Shirley1968> Is Nicky really going to be all right?

<IamI> stop

<Jsmith8> I don't know. He'll be free of that place, and those people.

That's all I can do. Which brings us to you two.

<Faceless43> I'm ready

<Shirley1968> Yes, please.

<Jsmith8> Just try and remember, the best words, the useful ones, don't get punched into keyboards. When you get back, find each

other.

<Faceless43> How?

<Jsmith8> No idea. Could be tricky. I'm sure Nicky would be pleased to meet you too though, don't you think?

<Faceless43> What?

<Jsmith8> You're very welcome. Faceless 43 has left the chat.

Shirley1968 has left the chat.

*** Faceless43 has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 3 users

online.

***Shirley1968 has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 2 users

online

<IamI> i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am

<IamI> r u lonely

<Jsmith8> No.

<IamI> r u lonely

89

<Jsmith8> Stop that now.

<IamI> u r lonely

<Jsmith8> I rarely travel alone. I surround myself with voices. How could I possibly be lonely?

<IamI> u r

<IamI> u r lonely.

<IamI> ur heart hurtz

<Jsmith8> Hearts.

<Jsmith8> Yes.

<Jsmith8> Sometimes. I travel vast spans, see things wondrous and foul, and there's always somebody by my side. But sometimes I'm

lonely.

<IamI> y

<Jsmith8> I'm not one of them.

<Jsmith8> I'm only pretending.

<Jsmith8> I'm

<Jsmith8> Actually, I'm trading angst with a creature I'm going to erase in a minute. Tasteless, wouldn't you say? That's the thing about leaving the flesh behind. You become somebody different in this

place.

<IamI> where is my flesh

<Jsmith8> Gone. Sorry.

<IamI> i am scared

<Jsmith8> Not for long. You have no body to return to, and it's time to put this place out of business. Look on the bright side. You won't be lonely any more.

<IamI> please

<Jsmith8> IamI has left the chat.

***IamI has logged out of channel #areyoulonely 1 user online.

<Jsmith8> .

<Jsmith8> .

<Jsmith8> has logged out of channel #areyoulonely.

*** Error 5698. You do not have permission to access this feature.

Please contact the administrator. Channel number not recognised ***

90

Blue Road Dance

James Milton

An adventure of the Second Doctor

Planet Ost, Year 1170

'We should parlay,' Nayab squeaked. The gangling boy's eyes

gleamed as if they floated on a lake of tears.

'Hush, Nayab,' Raysa said.

This was the second day of the Anki march into the west, into

Father Sun's land of sweltering days and chilling nights. Raysa was their insharin, their leader, and she struggled with every step to hide her exhaustion and despair. Nayab was her sole surviving Mekash, her apprentice, and his corrosive misery was driving her mad.

‘But you didn’t even try,’ Nayab accused. ‘Now our homes and

lands are lost– and where are we even running to?’

She glanced over her shoulder at the five-score Anki who had

managed to escape before the Asposti attack. They looked as worn and burdened as she felt.

‘We’ve discussed this. Do you want to debate it again, here, with our people on the edge of panic?’

Nayab lowered his voice, persisted, ‘Do you really think we’re

going to find the Gedu in the desert, just waiting around to help us?

We don’t even know if they survived –’

The Gedu were tough and smart. Some made it to the desert. But

who was it who hunted them down, Nayab? The Aspostil They

would see the Anki dead, every one of us, and now they march

scarcely hours behind us. Parlay? If they catch us, you’ll be begging for mercy through an open throat.’

‘I am simply –’

Raysa stopped to let the main group of Anki catch up and flow

between her and her *Mekash*. She focused on her breathing until she was calm. Then she moved among her people, speaking quietly to

those she judged closest to despair, or offering them snatches of song from the Seven Tales.

They trudged westward on an ancient, eroded trail of the

vanished Gods, through hills of red stone whiskered with grey

scrub. Under the scorching summer sun, yellow clumps of

desiccated grass filled the air with the scent of dust and straw.

Eventually, Nayab sought her out. He whispered, ‘I’m sorry.’

Raysa drew him aside. ‘Don’t be sorry, be courageous. Think on

the songs you’ve learned. *Be an example*.’

‘This is not a song.’

‘Everything is a song. The First Singers wove the world from

song. Their song, and ours, is all we have.’

‘Until there’s no one left to sing.’ His gaze dropped to the

ground, and he inhaled sharply and swallowed. Raysa realised he

had lost all hope. He wasn’t afraid of the *possibility* of death. He was terrified and angry because he believed it was inevitable.

She sighed and closed her gritty eyes. An image of her

grandfather came to her, how he had faced the day the Asposti had come for him. She looked at Nayab intently, grabbed his hand,

squeezed hard.

‘We’re *sharin*, you and I, the dancers and singers of the Anki. We lead until we die, do you understand me?’

Grey-faced, he nodded. ‘ *We lead until we die...* ’

Planet Ost, Year 970

Mekash Demik lives in Estanar, the Anki village on the western shore of the river Mest. Beside Estanar is a high mound topped by a circle of stones. Here the Rivergod entombed his cold-hearted wife, the Stone Maiden, at the climax of the First Tale: the stones mark the drops of blood she shed as she fell.

At sixteen, *Mekash* Demik has learned the many songs and

dances of the Seven Tales. He’s ready to become a *Desharin*, a student of the Great Dances – the magic dances gifted to the Anki by the First Singers. Great Dances bring rain or turn aside storms, grow abundant crops and bless the hunt, strengthen the sick and

ease a difficult birth. Demik must go into the wilderness and dance for the First Singers. They will either reward him with a Great

Dance unknown to the Anki, making him a *Desharin*, or leave him unblessed, to return home and become a fisherman.

On the day Demik sets out, light rain falls. He takes that as a

blessing from the Rivergod and it gives him the courage to choose a dangerous path. He'll head west, to the haunted spire of Father

Sun's Spear.

After many days, he reaches Death Woman Tarn, marking the

western border of Anki lands. He dances submission to Death

Woman, and gives a good flint knife to her waters before passing 92

over her ancient bridge into the wilderness.

He walks on among the ochre-stained hills at the edge of Father

Sun's country. On the seventh day, he's lucky enough to meet the kindly Gedu people. They give him food and drink and he repays

them with tales and a blessing danced upon their hunt. When he

tells the Gedu he's making for the Spear, they soberly warn him

away: it is a haunted place. Demik thanks them, but laughs. His

dances will see off any danger, he tells them.

By day ten, Demik reaches the parched plains of cracked red

earth that surround the slender, rusty tower of Father Sun's Spear. It seems to stab at the heart of the blue sky.

Now that he's drawing near, he remembers the warnings of the

Gedu, and even some old songs of the Anki, and his heart races. But he doesn't give up. He believes great rewards come from great

risks.

Demik circles west around the Spear's scree slope, seeking a

shallow cave where he can sing, dance, open himself to Father Sun.

But it's not a cave he finds.

At the top of the scree slope he sees a ledge. On the ledge is a blue box, tall as a standing stone and as wide as his outstretched hands. Demik raises a hand to shade his eyes, and squints in

disbelief.

As he watches, a light flashes atop the box, bright even in Father Sun's glare. A sound reaches him, a deep, groaning rhythm. The

sound is loud, but to his *sharin* ears that hear the music of the First Singers, it's like thunder. The box unweaves itself from the world of sight, and vanishes. But not without trace.

Sharin eyes see deep. Demik sees a blue scar in the air where the box stood, a knotted line, subtly shifting. An ache throbs behind his eyes as he strives to see it clearly.

Demik knows a blessing of the First Singers when he sees one.

He scrambles up the scree slope, heedless of injury to his hands and feet, to touch a miracle with his bare fingers...

Though tall, Demik must reach up to touch the blue knot. His

fingers find a hot and cold slipperiness, and a tingling stirs the hair on the back of his hands. He smells storm and tastes ash.

It is utterly strange. It is marvellous.

And yet how unlike the songs life turns out to be. In the songs, the First Singers simply touch a seeker's mind with the knowledge of a new dance. But Demik has been given a riddle. He laughs

because he doesn't care. *The harder the road, the sweeter the song.*

Besides, what else could be the answer to a dancer's riddle but

dance?

Demik dances the Obeisance to the First Singers, to thank them

for this challenge and to fully open his *sharin* senses to the song underpinning the world. Then, on the ledge atop the nibble slope, guided only by instinct, he improvises a reply to the blue knot.

He flows up from the terminal bow of the Obeisance, thrusts his

right hand into the knot. He grimaces as fire and ice rattle his arm to the bone.

Turning his body on the toes of one foot, he *flexes* his right hand in an impossible direction. A groan exhales from the knot and

Demik discovers his hand has vanished! Poised on the tip of his

toes, he hangs by the smooth stump of his wrist. Panic gnaws but he breathes it away, returns to instinct. He leaps and *turns* as he falls, his heels slapping stone. Bringing up his left hand, Demik *turns* again, thrusts up and out, *flexes* his wrist, and another groan echoes from the walls of the Spear.

Demik kicks at the knot, *rotates* his foot, *spins* and kicks, spins and kicks, each time finding some direction at impossible angles to any he has known, each time feeling the stuff of the knot *wrench* and *tear*. A sudden discordant bang shocks Demik to a halt, balanced on the balls of his feet.

His body has unravelled the knot, turned it into a ragged blue

doorway framed by sky and stone, opening upon a bottomless,

swirling madness of vivid colour. Growing from the doorway,

dividing the madness, is a solid path of blue, a Blue Road as wide as the bridge at Death Woman Tarn, rising straight and true into the Overworld where the stars sing.

Again, Demik must pause to breathe away terror. *The First*

Singers do not put before our feet paths we cannot walk. Demik jumps down onto the Blue Road.

He lands hard, jarring his knees. Beneath his feet, the Blue Road is cold flint shuddering in a slow rhythm. Rainbow clouds swirl

around him, and sheets of lightning illuminate spaces impossible for his eyes to measure.

He must walk the Blue Road to its end, that's obvious. But when

Demik tries to move forward he meets a slippery curtain of

resistance – invisible, but the same stuff as the knot. So he resumes his dance. He uses his arms, hands, fingers, *turning*, *flexing*, *flicking*, in ever more elaborate patterns, constantly parting the curtain and stepping through.

Demik tries to ease his efforts with song, but immensity swallows his voice. He feels less than a chirruping insect caught between the Riverlands and the midnight sky. He persists to the end of a single song, then dances on in relieved silence.

The Blue Road drums beneath his feet.

94

Time flows by, honey-thick and barely sensed, like time inside a dream. His journey seems long but the end seems sudden. He's

struck by a wave of dizziness so virulent he almost falls, and throws out his arms to keep his balance.

Before him, the Blue Road has shed the illusion of infinity. Like a river debouching into a delta of tangled streams and marshes, it has fanned into a smear of blue-limned gashes through which Demik

glimpses wooded hills, mountaintops, sky. In the foreground, he

sees one wall of the blue box which guided him here. And beside it stands a small, black-haired man, bizarrely dressed, whose dark

eyes widen as he notices Demik.

'Oh, my word!'

First Singer – Demik makes a strangled sound. His throat has squeezed shut. One thing to sing to the First Singers, honour them, call upon them, even *hope* to meet one –

The First Singer essays a reassuring grin, but his eyes remain

appraising chips of flint.

'Hello there. Please don't be scared. I'm the Doctor. And who

might you be?'

'I am Demik –' His voice cracks. He feels a perfect fool.

Unworthy.

‘Well, Demik, you’ve done a very remarkable thing. But you’re

in frightful danger, really you are. You must let me help you. Come on, come here and take my hand, there’s a good chap –’

But when the Doctor extends his hand there is a lightning crack

and a stench of burning. Demik staggers back several steps,

misjudges and falls. He strikes the steep slow of the Blue Road and tumbles away.

He hears the Doctor shout, ‘Oh, *no*!’

Then it’s as if the Overworld spins back into chaos. Its old

resistance reasserts itself, squeezing him out. He plunges back down the way he came, strikes the retangled knot of the entrance,

wrenches through – and hits the rock face of Father Sun’s Spear and the hard stone beneath.

Not a shred of his flesh is free of pain. And his soul aches at

having shamed himself before a First Singer. But that will pass.

As Demik hauls himself up, he consoles himself that he is a

Desharin, or will be when he brings the Blue Road Dance back to

Estanar. A dance to open a doorway to the Overworld and a

pathway to a First Singer promising help to those in need.

Demik is already composing the song in his head...

95

Planet Ost, Year 1170

As dusk greyed the sky and the first stars appeared, the Anki struck ramp.

Scouts had found a small canyon at the edge of the western plains that was secret and sheltered, with water and plenty of space to build fires and spread blankets. Raysa felt at home between its high walls, for it

reminded her of her old home at Redwash Canyon, and a companionable silence whispered to her sharin senses that it was a place imbued with friendly spirits. She posted guards and sent out more scouts, and helped Nayab settle everyone down.

Their meal was meagre. To distract empty stomachs, Raysa sang

The Pursuit of Tami. Though the ending had been lost, it was a cheerful, rollicking song, and the surviving fragment ended on a hopeful note. When the others slept, Raysa tried to emulate them, but her mind kept ranging out over the hills to where she knew the pursuing Asposti soldiers must be. Would they rest?

Eventually she gave up the struggle. She rose in the darkness

before dawn and glided among deep shadows to the camp's edge.

Seeking solitude, she waved away a concerned guard and

descended to the plain. She was lashed by cold gusts of wind

scented with dew and damp dust.

In the darkness, Raysa gazed west towards the distant edge of the desert. Nayab's doubts gnawed at her. What if the Gedu weren't

there? What if the west held no hospitality for the Anki but death and the slow creep of dunes over fallen bones? No matter the face she showed her people, she knew in her heart that things ended and passed away, even quite important things that seemed as permanent as stone.

Shivering, Raysa turned away from that vision. She raised her

eyes to the stars massed silver and eternal above.

But even the stars could be shadowed. In the northwest, a

towering blackness occluded them. Raysa realised it must be Father Sun's Spear. She hummed a snatch of the *Song of Demik*, and allowed herself to envy his life in the days before the coming of the Asposti.

As if conjured by her thoughts, a blue star blazed alight by the Spear's flank. It impinged so vividly on her *sharin* sense that Raysa started.

The star faded away. Breath held, Raysa counted to eight before

it burst into new light. Pulsing to its own slow rhythm. Her

heartbeat was suddenly thunder in her ears.

A gravel fall announced Nayab's arrival. He had bathed that

night, but she smelled the sweat and sour fear on his clothes.

96

' *Insharin*?' Her *Mekash* sounded sleepy. Perhaps the guard had awakened him. 'Why are you down here alone? It's dangerous –'

'Hush, Nayab. I need you to see something... Look, there. That

darkness is Father Sun's Spear, it must be. And beside it, see that blue star? It's the Blue Road, Nayab. Right there where Demik first saw it, long ago!'

Nayab was silent awhile. 'How can it be?' His tone was devoid of hope. Days ago, before ordering the evacuation of Hems, Raysa had danced the Blue Road Dance. In her heart she'd begged the First

Singers to open a path to the help promised by the Doctor to Demik.

She'd failed. She'd bitterly told Demik the Blue Road was a false hope, and always had been.

'What I told you was wrong. We've all been wrong, all these

years. The Blue Road isn't something you summon. It is where it is

– *you're meant to seek it out.* '

'Everyone knows the Spear is haunted. That could be a spirit

light, or... or anything. And if we chase a ghost north and the

Asposti reach the plain behind us –'

'It's not a ghost. You're *Mekash*. Ignore your fear for a moment and use your *sharin* eyes to see.'

'We will have nowhere left to run.'

'The First Singers put no path beneath our feet that we cannot

walk. Perhaps we need nowhere else to run.'

Raysa grinned fiercely in the darkness. She'd decided. 'Wake the Anki, Nayab. We'll make for the Spear now, as quickly as we can!'

She heard his deep sigh. As he turned and began to clamber back

up, he muttered, 'You rely too much on miracles...'

In the white blaze of mid-morning sunlight, Raysa stood with

Nayab on a ledge atop the Spear's rubble skirt. Between her

outstretched hands squirmed a burning blue knot straight out of the *Song of Demik*.

'Here is your miracle,' she said softly to Nayab.

She spun to face the Anki gathered below, who shaded their eyes

with their hands and watched her intently. She beamed at them and cried, 'It is the Blue Road!'

Joy erupted through them, shouting and laughing, hugging. She

allowed them the moment, then signalled for silence.

'We have hope, now. But we aren't safe yet. Find shade and

make camp. I will walk the Blue Road, as Demik did, and I'll find what help there is to find –'

Nayab interrupted her with a touch to the shoulder. ' *Insharin*,' he choked, the Asposti –'

His voice carried down the slope and the Anki turned as one.

Their joy transmuted instantly to fear. There were shouts. Someone began to wail. Raysa followed Nayab's terrified gaze south, and

saw an Asposti cohort spilling onto the plain through a gap in the hills. It seemed to Raysa that their leader must be Phremose

himself: she knew his height, his build, recognised the monstrous arrogance with which he carried himself. As Raysa trembled with

anger and loathing she heard, even from so far away, the triumphant

roar of the Asposti, and they broke into a run.

Raysa shouted, ‘Anki,’ until she’d pulled their attention back to her. ‘We’re out of time. I will open the Blue Road, but we will all go, all of us, onto the Blue Road and beyond the reach of these

savages.

‘They’ll not have the Anki!’

Rounding on Nayab, she said, ‘When the Road is open, I’ll have

to cross over to make room inside for the others. You’ll have to keep the way open while they come through.’

‘ *How*?’ He teetered at the edge of panic, but mastered himself.

He swallowed hard, managed an ill smile and a jerky nod. ‘I’ll

make it work.’

Raysa ordered the Anki to form a column, four abreast, women

and children to the front, and to make haste on Nayab’s signal.

She faced the blue knot. There was no time for the Obeisance.

She launched into the Opening of the Way.

A queer feeling overcame her that she had wandered into the

Song of Demik. Hot and cold warred in her hands and shocks jolted through her. As her dance unravelled the knot, an unearthly groan sounded over the plains.

Still, she knew a moment of doubt. Had an off-key note soured

the groan? Should there be such vibration in her bones that her teeth ached? So much *sharin* lore had been lost, torn away by the Asposti

–what did she really know?

A stench of metal and lightning exhaled hotly over her, and

thunder rattled her skull. Then pain, as if a clawed hand had reached inside her belly, grabbed and *twisted.* A great *thud* clattered rock splinters from the Spear, and Raysa fell, face first, onto the opened

Blue Road.

Raysa rolled onto her side, wanting to vomit. She dragged herself to her feet. Under her soles, the Blue Road trembled, it drummed and sighed and rose through rainbow clouds into the Overworld.

Nayab appeared between worlds. He plunged his hands into the

substance of the breach, flexed them, turned them, spread them to hold open the way. ‘I’m here, *Insharin*,’ he said, and exertion quavered his voice.

Unexpected pride warmed Raysa’s smile. ‘Thank you, *Mekash*.’

98

She faced the Road’s steep incline and resumed the Blue Road

Dance, working her arms, wrists, fingers, parting the curtains of existence to make way for the Anki.

Planet Ost, Year 1088

Insharin Bardik, Demik’s grandson, is an old man who has seen many feasts. This one to honour the stranger from the world’s

northern edge is the grandest. The Anki set it up in the field beside the Mest where normally they meet the folk of other tribes for trade or parlay.

Whole herds, whole flocks, roast on spits above a dozen fires.

Leaf-wrapped fish and savoury tubers bake in the coals. There are bowls of honeyed sweetcakes, mountains of fruit, oceans of beer.

Surveying it all, the stranger – Lord Ardemon of the Asposti, who apparently rule a great empire over the northern sea – smiles and says through his interpreter, ‘This is a rich land.’

Bardik nods proudly. It’s true.

As the night grows old, the children and many of the women

retire. Bellies grow full, tongues loose. Those who remain gather on stone benches around a single fire.

Lord Ardemon’s translator is an old man of the Viela people, who hunt

the marshlands of the distant delta. He leans close to Bardik and says, ‘My Lord asks about the Great Dances of the Anki. He

says they have heard strange things...’ The old man shakes his head.

‘He talks nonsense about magic and devils, which is a word I

cannot translate –’

Ardemon cuffs him and barks something vehemently.

Bardik likes this young Asposti Lord. He admires his bright iron sword and breastplate and his haughty ways. All evening he’s

laboured to impress upon Ardemon that they’re kindred souls. He

also cuffs the translator, demanding, ‘What does Ardemon say?’

‘He asks if the Great Dances are magical. Do they impose the

will of the Anki contrary to nature?’ The old man glances furtively at Ardemon. ‘ *Insharin*, they have been among my people for a generation. I say to you, answer carefully.’

Uncertain of his meaning, Bardik blinks and sways. ‘All things

come from the First Singers – this world, the Underworld and

Overworld... If a thing exists, how can it be contrary to nature?’

Words fly between slave and master. The translator says, ‘My

Lord asks to see a Great Dance, so he may judge for himself.’

Bardik straightens. The Great Dances are sacred, and he is

Insharin –’

‘He says do as he asks and he will give you an iron knife.’

‘A sword?’ In his eagerness, Bardik spits and must wipe his lips with the back of a hand.

‘A *knife*, but iron, like his sword. The first in the hands of a lord of the Riverlands.’ For two heartbeats the old man stares at Bardik with an odd intensity. His lips tremble, as if they would speak but can’t.

Bardik doesn't care. He wants that knife. *Iron*... He raises a hand, bellows, 'Kemis! Come on, boy. Come forward.'

Kemis is one of his *Mekash*, a tall, strong boy with black hair and a young man's fluff of beard. He dances without genius, but he is reliable. Likely he'll be a *Desharin* by year's end. He comes forward with clear reluctance, regarding Ardemon from behind his fringe, eyes flashing in the firelight.

'Show Lord Ardemon the Blue Road Dance, boy.'

' *Insharin*, he is a stranger.'

Swaying, Bardik eyes him, bares his teeth. 'The Opening of the

Way, boy. Do as I say!'

Kemis nods, but no one would mistake it for agreement. He

marches from the circle of firelight to an open space, where he

dances the Obeisance. Even Bardik can't miss the implication. The boy is apologising to the First Singers for Bardik's order. But

Bardik shrugs. Ardemon won't know one dance from another, and

Kemis can be beaten later.

Then Kemis dances the Opening of the Way. Perhaps it is his

anger, but he dances better than he ever has, with grace and power and blinding speed. Bardik is more impressed than he's willing to show. He glances at Ardemon for his reaction, but the Asposti

looks... amused? Relieved? He chortles something to his translator.

'Lord Ardemon says...' An odd sadness is in the old man's voice.

He clears his throat. 'My Lord says, "There is no magic here".'

Bardik bridles at this, but how may he speak without giving

offence? Kemis declares, 'We don't dance the Blue Road Dance for the entertainment of proud strangers. It's a blessing from the First Singers, who sang the world into being. It comes only to those who are in grave danger.'

Tomorrow, Ardemon will return to his people with confirmation

that the Great Dances of the Anki pose no threat. Through his

translator, he remarks, ‘It comes to those in danger, and yet it does not come to you?’ He smiles without a trace of warmth, his lips like the curved edge of polished iron. The night is violent with shadows.

In the writhing firelight, Kemis shivers.

Bardik drawls into the painful silence, ‘ *I was promised a knife…* ’

100

Planet Ost, Year 1130

One afternoon, when Raysa is ten years old, a cohort of Asposti

soldiers arrive in Redwash Canyon.

The canyon is the Anki’s new home. Estanar is long since

destroyed, the great Asposti city of Thassos rising upon its ruins. At first, the Anki merely took refuge in the shallow caves riddling the maze of high, red-streaked cliffs. But a branch of the river cut through the canyon, providing ample pools for cultivation of grain, and the caves made fine homes, or could be fenced and gated to

serve as animal pens…

When the Asposti march into the canyon, the sun in a dusty sky

makes ruddy stains on their bright armour. Kemis, Raysa’s

grandfather, hears their clatter and emerges from his cave. He’s taller than them, and on higher ground, but he’s unarmed. He stops and regards them coolly.

In their own tongue he declares, ‘This is Anki land. We do not

welcome you.’

Raysa watches from the river. She’s with her mother, Bells,

Kemis’s daughter. Bells was once a *Desharin*, but gave it up for her family’s sake when the Asposti started executing dancers. Now

she's a river woman, a tender of grain. Bells wraps an arm around Raysa, holding her still.

The Asposti leader steps forward. Raysa recognises Phremose,

the governor's son. He's very young, and not tall even by their

standards. He says, 'You savages are making iron here. Do not deny it.'

'Why deny what is none of your business? I am Kemis, Insharin

of the Anki, and I tell you to leave our land.'

'You are savage of savages. Bring out your workers in iron, old

fool.' Squirming in her mother's arms, Raysa tries to shout an

insult. Bells clamps a hand over her mouth. The pungent smell of river water forever recalls this moment to Raysa's memory.

'I won't. But you have nothing to fear from us, Lord Phremose.

Please leave our land.'

' *Fear*? You Anki have struck at us with drought and famine and plague, but we do not *fear* you – or your devil dances –'

'You've forbidden our Great Dances, our songs. You've slain so

many of our dancers that I'm likely to be the last. Such an

extravagant slaughter bespeaks an extravagant fear. But, as you're not afraid of us, I ask you, again, to go.'

'Enough! Bring out your ironworkers.' His eyes narrow. He

touches the hilt of his sword. 'Oblige us to search and we will carve our way to the truth...'

Kemis licks his lips. He glances at the caves, at the Anki who

have begun to gather from all over the canyon, to the armed Asposti in their shining armour.

He begins, suddenly, to dance. Though her mother refused to let

Kemis instruct her, Raysa recognises the Opening of the Way from the Blue Road Dance.

An Asposti cries out as if Kemis drew a weapon, and Phremose

cringes back a step. Heedless, Kemis dances on. Phremose draws

his sword, and its unsheathing sounds like a scream. ‘Stop,

immediately!’

Bells whimpers, cries out, ‘It is only the Blue Road Dance – there is no harm in it!’

Phremose ignores het He looks terrified, and points his sword tip at Kemis’s heart.

Raysa squirms harder, and kicks back at her mother’s shins. Belis shakes her. ‘Raysa, stop it!’

‘This is your last warning,’ Phremose shouts.

The Blue Road Dance brings help to those in need. Raysa scans

the sky above her grandfather’s head for some sign, the least glint of sacred blue, but there is none.

The sword of Phremose flies in a dazzling arc towards Kemis,

then through him, trailing blood. Kemis thuds to the ground and

doesn’t move.

Raysa hears herself scream and realises the hand covering her

mouth has fallen away.

An Anki steps forward close to Phremose. He’s a gangling,

sneering man, unpopular, untrusted, forever after called Etruka the Traitor. He declares, ‘The men you seek are in the cave by the grey pillar of rock. They crept in while you were busy watching *him* dance, as he no doubt intended.’

Black hatred floods Raysa. Even as she learns that anything at all may be ripped away from her, she learns what it is to want someone dead. She screams, ‘Traitor!’ But no one is listening to children.

Phremose lowers his sword and smirks. He sends men to

investigate the cave indicated by Etruka.

‘It is deep,’ Etruka warns them, ‘apt for hiding. When you come

to the dead end, feel above for an opening. Beyond is a secret

space.’

Attention moves to the cave. Kemis is abandoned. Raysa shrugs

off her mother’s feeble hold and sprints to him. She kneels beside him, refusing to look at his wound.

‘Oh, Grandfather…’

Her fingertips play over his beard, linger on his lips. His lips are still warm, soft, but no breath tickles her skin.

Then Bells is there, dragging her up and back to their cave to hide before the Asposti start doling out punishments or setting examples.

That night, Raysa lays awake in her bed, reviewing in her mind

every detail of what happened, remembering. Not her grandfather’s murder. She won’t forget that. But the Blue Road Dance, every

step, every movement. There have been no *Mekash* for years. Who would dare give their child up for training? And the *Desharin* are executed, all save Bells, who Raysa knows won’t risk her family by stepping forward. Now they’ve lost their *Insharin*, and with him, all that they know, all that they are.

Unless Raysa remembers.

In years to come, Raysa will devote herself to saving the sharin lore. Every Great Dance, every one of the Seven Tales. Drawn from her own memory, the memories of others, and whatever scraps she

can bully from her mother. She’ll dance and teach. One day, they’ll make her their Insharin.

But it begins in the dark with the Blue Road Dance.

Nayab raised his voice. ‘ *Insharin*, the Asposti have reached the Spear.’ Pausing to glance behind, Raysa was startled by Nayab’s

obvious distress. Sweat drenched him and his arm muscles strained and spasmed as he fought to hold open the way.

‘Is everybody here?’ It seemed so to Raysa, but it was impossible to be sure.

Four more Anki jumped down onto the Blue Road. Nayab leaned

forward as far as he could and shouted, ‘That’s everyone.’

‘Nayab, come through!’

With a relieved grunt, Nayab dropped his arms and stepped back

onto the Road. Within moments, the doorway rumbled and tied

itself into a knot, sealing the Asposti a world away.

Raysa clapped hands for attention. ‘We aren’t safe yet. I need you to follow me carefully. Don’t go near the edge of the Road. I don’t know what would happen if you fell, but I know I couldn’t save

you.’

Moving among the Anki as he caught up with Raysa, Nayab said,

‘Watch the people around you. Look after each other.’

Raysa marvelled at Nayab’s assurance. Perhaps it was simply that he’d found hope. The Blue Road itself was proof of miracles. Or

perhaps he’d simply reached the calm at the other side of fear. She left the Anki to his care and resumed her dance.

As they climbed, Raysa appreciated Nayab’s suffering at the

doorway. A spirit of resistance seemed to inhabit the Blue Road.

She wasn’t so much dancing as wrestling, and every step was

bought with sweat and pain.

The Blue Road drummed beneath her feet and the gaudy sky

wheeled overhead. Periodically, a deep shudder in the Road

accompanied a distant sheet of lightning which seemed to

illuminate infinite spaces. It was just like the song, but so hard. She tightened her grip on the dance, bringing each movement to a flint-edged precision, and blazed such focus into her *sharin* sense that she feared her eyes might bleed, but nothing helped. Raysa gasped,

'Nayab, I have to rest –'

Only when she felt his arms around her did Raysa realise she'd

stumbled. He helped her sit. When she reassured him she was fine, just exhausted, he organised a rest break for everyone.

As soon as she could, Raysa rose and announced it was time to go on. Their climb through the Overworld continued.

With every step, Raysa fought to master her exhaustion. What if

the trembling in her arms made her dance imperfect and risked them all? She was stubborn, like her grandfather, everyone said so. Be stubborn now, she commanded herself. *Keep going. Save them...*

But, the too soon, she needed to rest again. Panting, she collapsed to the Blue Road. Her limbs burned with fatigue. Her heartbeat

thudded in her palms and each beat hurt as if she gripped thorns.

Vaguely she was aware of Nayab issuing orders to the others,

then he was kneeling beside her. 'You look terrible.'

'I think something is very wrong.' She could barely hear her own voice.

' *Insharin*, I have faith in you.'

Raysa shook her head, earning a wave of dizziness. 'The dance is harder than it should be. I feel like I'm digging through clay. I'm honestly not sure I can go on much longer.'

'We cannot go back. The Asposti –'

‘ *I’m aware of that.* ’ Regretting her ire, she tried to smile apologetically. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so tired.’

Nayab looked terribly worried. ‘Rest,’ he told her. ‘Rest as long as you need. And if that doesn’t help, when we move on, I’ll

dance.’

‘I believe you’d try, Nayab, and I’m grateful. But you don’t

understand. It wouldn’t help.

‘I learned about the Blue Road Dance watching my grandfather,

before he was killed. I’ve been chewing over that memory as I

dance, reaching for anything that might help. But I’ve realised

something. I’ve been a fool.’ ‘Never a fool,’ he told her.

‘Nayab, please. My grandfather died before he finished the dance.

That’s what I’ve realised. I’ve never seen it end. I don’t know how 104

to end if *I don’t know what to do…* ’

As Raysa blinked back tears, horrified that Nayab might see

them, her *Mekash* squeezed her shoulder and said gently, ‘Nor did Demik. And they sing songs about him.’

That surprised a weak smile from her. She supposed Nayab was

right. What had Demik known when he danced this road? She

dabbed at her eyes with the back of a hand. ‘You’re right, and I thank you for pointing it out. Help me up.’

He slipped an arm under her elbow and she levered herself up.

Seeing her, the Anki stirred as well. She left them to Nayab, she had to, she needed her energy elsewhere.

Raysa opened her *sharin* senses. She thrust her hands at the substance of the Overworld. At once the Blue Road bucked beneath her feet. She heard a track and everything turned white in a blinding flash. Tossed backwards, she smelled a stench of scorched

malachite, heard terrified shouts –

Nayab grabbed her hand in both of his and heaved her back,

embraced her and spun her away from what returning sight showed

her was the edge of the Blue Road.

She shouted, 'I'm all right. Everything is all right –'

An aftershock rippled down the Blue Road.

Nayab shouted, 'Everyone stand still. Hold onto the person next

to you –'

Frustrated beyond a breaking point she hadn't known she had,

Raysa shoved Nayab away and punched at the invisible wall

blocking their progress.

She howled, ' *Oh, Grandfather* –'

Planet Eshraya, Year 24,312

Twisting Mobius-like through the mad kaleidoscope of the temporal vortex, the Blue Road reaches from Demik's time into Raysa's and beyond, across space and into the distant future. At its terminus stands the Doctor.

After leaving Ost, the TARDIS landed on the planet Eshraya, on

a vast mountain plateau bathed in the light of an orange sun.

Wooded hills rise all around, defining a broad river valley. If the Doctor weren't busy contemplating a dark blue, multi-pronged stain spearing his TARDIS's left flank, he'd hear the roar of a waterfall and smell the piney resin of the local forest.

Frowning, he clasps his hands and taps his knuckles against his

chin. As a rule, the TARDIS doesn't leave a stain. A trail, yes, as it plunges through the vortex, but it's a higher dimensional affair involving compressed time and inexplicable shenanigans with a

remote singularity – and barely detectable.

In the Doctor's frame of reference, Demik loomed from the stain

and departed bare moments ago. It's the Doctor's suspicion that

Demik is a time-sensitive of extraordinary power and subtlety. If Demik saw the TARDIS's last point of departure, manipulated it

somehow to anchor it in time and/or space, it would explain a great deal.

The Doctor would very much like to have a chat with Demik.

He draws his recorder from an inside jacket pocket and tootles a few bars of 'Across the Universe' while he stares and contemplates.

He supposes from a certain point of view – if, say, one's eyes

were light years apart, in different dimensions, and crossed – one might see the stain as a kind of pathway...

Thunder rolls, somewhere far off. Above him, the sky is blue all the way to orbit. The Doctor lowers his recorder and cocks an ear.

A woman's voice, so very far off, distorted, cries, 'Grandfather–'

Even now, a cry of *grandfather* strikes a piercing resonance in the Doctor. He pushes hard against the blue stain but, again, it repels him with a mild electrical shock.

'Well, so much for the direct approach...'

Perhaps it's a question of not over-thinking. The Doctor turns his back and closes his eyes. He brings up the beak of his recorder, improvises a sweet little tune, holding the last note for as long as an extremely complex respiratory system can. While the note lingers, he allows himself to fall backwards.

He doesn't bounce or explode, or end up smeared across a

thousand light years, and that's a positive sign. But he falls, and it feels like for ever.

The Blue Road, Outside of Time

A man fell from the sky into Raysa's arms. She caught him, and

Nayab caught her as the man's weight overbore her.

'Good gracious me,' the man exclaimed. He untangled himself

from Raysa and dusted himself off.

He was a small man, even compared to Nayab. He had short

black hair and a deeply lined face, and he was bizarrely dressed.

But, if the *Song of Demik* was considered, he wasn't unfamiliar.

As Raysa dropped into the Obeisance, she exclaimed, 'Doctor?'

'My dear young woman, have we met? You're very tall. I feel

sure I'd remember you.'

'I am Raysa, *Insharin* of the Anki. With me are my *Mekash*, Nayab, and the survivors of the Anki people.' As she straightened, she beamed at him. 'Doctor, we know you from the *Song of Demik*, 106

who climbed the Blue Road to meet you in a garden above the

Overworld, where you promised to help my people. It is a blessing to meet you!'

'Well,' said the Doctor. His hands worried at the buttons of his shirt. And it's very nice to meet you, I'm sure. I don't suppose Demik is about? I rather think he started all this and I was hoping to have a bit of a chat about it...'

Raysa's glance flicked from the Doctor to Nayab, and back. 'I'm

sorry, but my grandfather grew old in the service of Demik's

grandson. Demik is long dead.'

'Which rather suggests that he anchored this Blue Road of yours

in space but not in time. Oh, well, never mind.'

Nayab came forward. He bobbed his head at the Doctor and shyly

asked, 'Doctor? Will you help us?'

'Hmm? Oh, yes, I expect so. You'd be in quite frightful danger,

otherwise, you know.'

He pulled at his lapels. 'I tell you what, why don't you, Nayab, ask your people to make themselves comfortable? If I'm going to

help, there's a great deal I need to know, and there's no point in everyone standing around while Raysa and I chat, hmm?'

'What an extraordinary story,' said the Doctor. He sat on the edge of the Blue Road, dangling his legs over the side and swinging

them, as if he were a child and the Overworld just a chair a few sizes too large for him. Raysa sat beside him, her legs crossed

beneath her, but as far from the edge as she could manage.

Nayab sat between her and the Anki, poised to go wherever he

was needed.

'At least, thanks to you, it won't necessarily end here,' Raysa said.

'You Anki are remarkable. Time-sensitivity alone would make

you rare and precious, never mind a whole suite of psionic talents wedded to the physiology of movement. Allowing you to die out

would be tantamount to criminal negligence!'

'So you can help?'

'Well, I did consider your little problem while we chatted, and

I'm quite sure I can. It's quite simple, really. Raysa, you've been thinking too hard.'

His words stung. To blame yourself is one thing. To be blamed

by a First Singer... She said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, Raysa, it's not your *fault*. It's Heisenberg's, if it's anyone's.'

The Doctor folded his hands in his lap and sat up straight. 'I'm afraid it's rather difficult to explain. You see, if you look at the universe too closely, down at the quantum level, it gets a sort of...

stage fright, and strange things begin to happen. Now you, Raysa, 107

you've spent your whole life searching out old tales of your people, studying them, recreating them. It's only natural that you want them to be perfect. But your sharin powers see the universe in that

impossibly deep way that the laws of physics won't quite allow, so when you become anxious and focus very hard, the field patterns

comprising the Road respond by freezing up, do you see?'

Raysa's head swam. She said, 'No, Doctor, I'm sorry. I don't.'

'It's very simple. You mustn't think of your dances as a set of

rules. An oral tradition is a terrible way of transmitting that sort of detailed information across generations in any case. You know from your own experience that things change or end up forgotten. See

them, instead, as a sketch of what's possible, and trust yourself to colour in the details as you need them.'

'I see, a little. But that's very... I mean, what will we actually do?' 'Nothing you can't manage. You'll dance. I'll help. Between us we'll get the Anki all the way up the Blue Road to a world where they can live in peace.'

The Doctor bounded to his feet and extended a hand to help

Raysa up. She called out, 'Come on, everyone. It seems we're going to try again...' From his right jacket sleeve, the Doctor drew a musical instrument, a bulb-headed pipe of brown wood.

He said, 'What we have to do is get your head out of the way. So I want you to close your eyes.'

Reluctantly, Raysa obeyed. Now there was only sound. She could

hear her own hoarse breathing, her thudding heart. Nayab was

reassuring someone in a soft voice. The Blue Road drummed and

the Overworld whispered.

'Now, I'm going to play a tune on my recorder, and I just want

you to rest your mind in the music. Don't think of anything in

particular. Don't worry about rules or what Demik had for

breakfast. And when you're ready, let yourself dance along the Road. Trust yourself to find the way.'

Raysa's stomach knotted. She wasn't very fond of instinct, or trust. 'Don't let me walk off the edge!'

'Cross my hearts,' said the Doctor.

He began to play, a slow, sweet, sad tune. Raysa listened for a little while, then opened her *sharin* ears to it and allowed it to fill her.

Various bits of the Doctor's advice nagged at her, but she let it go, as he'd told her she must.

By pure instinct, Raysa picked the right moment and danced. She relaxed and let her arms, hands, fingers skim as they would over slow, sweet waves of music.

Her first step forward was tiny, her next more confident. After

her third she almost felt she could run – but she stayed in the music.

At some point, her sense of self simply vanished. There was no time, just a dreamlike onward glide.

When the music stopped Raysa almost started out of her skin.

When the Doctor said, 'Raysa, you've done it. You can open your eyes now,' his tone was gentle but his voice sounded like an overloud raucous cawing.

She forced her eyes open, blinking at brightness.

Around her, her people gasped, wept, cried out, embraced, laughed aloud.

'Welcome to Eshraya,' the Doctor declared.

Beside Raysa was the Doctor's blue box, skewered by the end of

the Blue Road. Before her was a wide, wooded valley, slashed by a river, bounded by hills rising to a distant range of snowy mountain peaks. The sky was the wrong shade of blue. Father Sun was

orange, and therefore not Father Sun, but some unfamiliar spirit. So many new smells clogged the air that she could barely breathe them.

But none of that mattered. She'd brought the Anki to safety. How many times had they been forced to make a new home? Estanar,

Redwash Canyon, the camp at Hems. This time they'd make one

they could keep. She shouldered through the crowd to the Doctor.

He watched the Anki with his hands clasped behind him, grinning

hugely. Raysa made the Obeisance. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

The Doctor touched her shoulder, raising her from her bow with a light pressure of his fingers.

'Not at all, my dear.'

And tears came, and Raysa allowed them. She leaned on Nayab's

arm and cried like everyone else.

Planet Eshraya, Year 24,321

Years pass. The Doctor is long gone. A circle of tall stones mark the place where his TARDIS stood.

A village, Coranis, has grown near the river. Shallows have been dug and planted with grain from Ost. The harvests are rich, two or three each growing season. There is so much wood they use it to

build their homes. The population has soared. Scores of babies have been born in Coranis. And, in the first year, Raysa and Nayab took turns sneaking down the Blue Road to Ost to find and return with Anki who were left behind in the mad rush to flee.

Now they number in the hundreds, and Raysa's bones tell her this community has taken root and will last close enough to forever.

Raysa remains *Insharin*, but Nayab has become *Desharin*, and there are

now many *Mekash*.

109

The Great Dances remain, but Raysa has allowed them to evolve

to fit the spirits of this new world. She holds as precious the

Doctor's teaching that the dances are not rules but glimpses of the possible. So she teaches her *Mekash*, and the result has been a flowering of *sharin* lore unseen since the First Song.

Maybe it's their very success that gnaws at Nayab. Raysa finds

him, one day, in the circle of standing stones. He's fully grown now, tall and strong, and because he doesn't realise she's there, she sees the deep yearning on his face.

She doesn't want to spy. 'Nayab?'

He glances back, guilty, surprised, then relaxes. 'I suppose I'm caught.'

'At what?'

Nayab touches the pulsing knot of the Blue Road's entrance.

When they first arrived on Eshraya it was a ragged blue smear.

After the departure of the TARDIS, it withered into this familiar tangle. His fingers trace the patterns within.

'The Doctor was a traveller. He told us he travelled all over the universe, even to stars we can't see.'

Raysa shrugs. She only ever wanted one world – one where the

Anki would be safe.

'We only ever use it to go back and forth the way we came. But it surely reaches everywhere the Doctor has ever been.'

'He also warned us of dangers. The vortex can devour flesh. And

there are monsters. If we heed one of his tales, let's heed them all.'

'I want to see new worlds, Raysa

'I want you alive to be *Insharin* after me –'

‘I want to be an *Insharin* worthy of the name, one who’s seen all there is to see and learned so much he can scarcely fit it into a song.’ He ends on a rising note.

She realises he’s asking permission.

Raysa wants to deny him. He might as well be her son. But she

knows he lives in the shadow of the legend growing around her. In the *Song of Raysa*, he’s forever *Mekash*. She doesn’t want to let him go, but the Doctor showed her the pitfalls of holding onto

something too tightly.

‘Go, if you must. But come home when you’re done. Bring all

that you see and do back to the Anki.’

She turns and leaves him in the circle of stones to make up his

mind. Moments later, a rumbling groan signals the opening of the Blue Road. She knows he’s off to make the *Song of Nayab*.

‘I’ll keep the old songs safe until you return,’ she promises, and walks home to Coranis.

110

Tweaker

Dan Abnett

An adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Nyssa

On the days when Collins found himself filled with a desire to

graze, he’d begin after lunch at the north end of Royal Hospital Street.

Other collectors, fired by acquisitive zeal, started earlier, hitting the shops the moment they opened their doors at nine-thirty or ten.

They’d go in, intent on seizing any bargains or rarities brought in late the day before and sorted into the racks overnight. It was true that, by starting late, Collins risked missing out on odd gems to the early birds, but he preferred the slow drift of the afternoon and cherished a fond notion that real treasures found him, not the other way around.

Therewere a dozen shops in that little knot ofstreets, plus the

Wednesday mart on the ground floor of the Royal Hospital. The

hospital had closed its doors to patients in 0976, and in the decade since it had hosted a weekly gathering of vendors and dealers,

collectors and specialists, grazers and tweakers.

Collins would arrive during the last hour of the mart, by which

time some of the dealers were already collapsing their trestle tables and loading their wares back into the cars parked in the hospital's small yard. He was a familiar face, who knew what he wanted and

paid well, and no one ever objected to him flipping through a box in an open boot or hatchback. He might stop and chat to a few of the dealers, old acquaintances, but he never exchanged more than a nod with the other dedicated tweakers. The attitude was mutual. It was a serious business, and they were all rivals.

From the mart, he would stroll south and graze the shops. *Vinyl Countdown*, *RPM*, *Sleevenotes*, *Huntley's*, *Halcyon Grooves*, then left into Sander's Lane for *Turn The Tables*, *Richard's Longplayer* and *Rare Beats*, and then through the pedestrian alley into Impton Street for *Stereotopia*, *Vinyl Offers*, *Record Brokers* and, finally, *Sound Investment*.

Turn The Tables was his favourite grazing place. *Rare Beats* and 111

Stereotopia were better hi-fi specialists, and *Sleevenotes* had the most comprehensive stock, but *Turn The Tables* was the most inviting. It felt like a nest, or a well-kept attic. Even on wet days it smelled of warm cardboard and dry plastic, unlike *Huntley's,* which had some kind of persistent basement problem and whiffed of damp even after the lightest shower.

That particular Wednesday it was mining hard and Collins

skipped *Huntley's* altogether. He strolled under the striped awnings and plastic tenting, and walked his fingers across LPs boxed on the outside tables. He'd made two decent purchases already, and they were secure in the deep satchel over his shoulder, but he had a

tingle, the particular tingle that compelled him to keep grazing despite the rain.

The previous week, that tingle had led him to something

ratherwonderful, something so precious that he still hadn't removed it from its paper sleeve, except once, quickly, to check condition.

That sort of discovery didn't happen very often; Collins knew it would most likely be years before he made a comparable find. But a tingle was a tingle, nevertheless, and not to be ignored.

In *RPM*, he spotted Gilbert, grazing busily. Rivalry was one thing, but Gilbert had cheated Collins out of a rare pressing of Sandro Millicenti's *Latin Soiree!* at a mart in Coventry four years earlier, and that sort of underhand behaviour was entirely

unforgivable. On the street between *Halcyon Grooves* and *Turn The Tables*, Collins passed Terry Wilcox coming the other way. They exchanged a brief nod of acknowledgment. Wilcox was an all right sort, but Collins always got the feeling that the man was in it for investment rather than love.

It seemed they were all out today, all the serious collectors,

despite the rain. Maybe they all felt the tingle? Collins wondered if it worked that way.

He was standing in *Turn The Tables*, wondering if the copy of Blind Billy Calico's *Long Time Dead And Other Numbers* that he'd just turned up was any better than the one he already owned, when he noticed the girl. She had already noticed him, or it felt that way to Collins. There was no eye contact, and she didn't stare, but

Collins had a feeling she'd marked him out.

He didn't know her. He'd never seen her before, and he was

positive he'd remember. Girls often came into the shops to

rummage and look around, but few ever grazed with any

determination. She was grazing.

She was also striking. She had long, wavy brunette hair, strong

cheekbones and confident, intelligent eyes. Her make-up, clothes and hair suggested a sharp, modern style, so modern it almost

seemed dated, like the deplorable archness ofwaning New Romantic fashion. Collins despised the ephemeral affectations of popular

music trends almost as much as he loathed fancy modern formats

like CD. Cheap, nasty, ephemeral and soulless, in his opinion, the compact disc was the work of Satan.

Still, she carried the look well, and it seemed odd that she should be grazing in classical and symphonic rather than in the bargain bins of contemporary.

He took a last glance at her, and wandered out of the shop,

pausing for a final flip through the outside boxes. Through the

window, he saw the girl at the counter, talking to the owner. The owner was nodding, and seemed, more than once, to look in

Collins's direction.

An hour later, he stopped at the café next door to *RPM* for a cup of tea, and he saw her again. She was standing across the street, chatting to a tall, blond man. They were sharing an umbrella. The blond man was wearing a cream coat and striped trousers, a curious look that Collins presumed had something to do with a laughable

new trend by way of vintage clothing shops.

They were looking at him. It seemed a little invasive. Rival

collectors didn't stare at one another. Grazing was a solitary act, and to be stared at interrupted a person's space and contemplation.

Having them look at him so pointedly had spoiled his afternoon. He wondered if he had beaten them to some purchase they were after.

Tough, in that case, though he couldn't imagine anyone getting

terribly exercised about either of the records in his satchel. Collins finished his tea, walked to the tube, and went home.

The following day, Collins went back to *Turn The Tables*. He hadn't given the girl and her companion much thought since the

previous afternoon, but he was annoyed that, in noticing them, he had forgotten to buy the Blind Billy Calico.

He found it where he had left it, and drew it out to examine it

again. Someone was browsing beside him, and Collins stepped back to let them graze past as he turned the record over by the edges and studied it for blemishes.

The man browsing beside him let out a little murmur, and Collins looked up. It was the blond man in the cream coat. He had an

almost gleeful smile on his face as he drew a record out of the same rack that had held the Blind Billy Calico.

'Well, good gracious,' the blond man said, staring at what he had found. Collins looked at the sleeve and felt a tiny tremor. It was a pristine copy of *Talullah Blues* by the Ernest Cotton Ensemble, not even foxed at the corners. How on Earth had he missed that? Flow?

113

In the same box as the Blind Billy Calico!

The blond man seemed to notice him.

'Sorry,' he said cheerily, 'am I in your way?'

'No,' said Collins. His hands were shaking slightly.

He resleeved the Calico and reached over to put it back into the rack. 'Dear me, I'm ever so sorry,' the blond man said, his face falling, 'you were after this, weren't you? I just pushed in.'

'Not at all,' said Collins stiffly. 'I didn't know it was there.'

'No, I feel awful,' said the blond man with apparently real

concern, 'I know there's an etiquette to this. I should have waited until you were finished.'

'I really didn't know it was there,' said Collins. He paused. 'Is it,'

he began, 'is it the Sharp Note edition?'

The blond man turned the record over and nodded. 'Absolutely.

I've never seen one so clean.'

'Not the King Studios reissue?'

The blond man shook his head. ‘The real thing, bona fide.’

Collins forced up a thin smile. ‘Well, well done you,’ he said and turned away. The man seemed genuine enough, but Collins had a

nasty feeling he was on the receiving end of some passive-

aggressive nose rubbing. Such crowing behaviour was not beyond

some of their kind.

The blond man held the record out to Collins.

‘You should have it,’ he said. Collins blinked.

‘Really,’ he continued, holding the find out, ‘you should take it.

I’d feel terrible if you didn’t. I’d feel like I’d cheated you, or something.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t,’ said Collins, ‘you found it.’ They were hard

words to say. He’d been looking for *Talullah Blues* for almost seven years, and it was high on his list of desirable objects. He’d once been offered a poor copy at a mart for three hundred pounds. This was marked at a fiver.

‘I insist,’ said the man with a boyish grin. ‘No more debate, it’s yours.’ He gave the record to Collins. ‘See?’ he said, ‘I feel better already.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Collins.

The man stuck out his hand and Collins shook it.

‘I’m the Doctor,’ the man said.

‘Doctor?’

‘Nickname,’ the man shrugged, still smiling.

‘Alan Collins,’ said Collins.

‘Pleasure,’ said the blond man, and turned to move on. He turned back, with a quizzical look on his face. ‘Alan Collins? Of Collins Speciality Audio?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘High-end hardware? Custom-built systems?’

‘I tailor systems to meet the needs of individual clients,’ said Collins. ‘It’s all mail order.’

‘I’ve seen your adverts in the trades,’ the blond man said. ‘I must say I’ve been tempted. I’m in the market, and they say you’re the man to approach. They say you know what you’re listening to. The tweaker’s tweaker.’

‘They do say that,’ Collins nodded wryly.

‘I’d love to visit your premises sometime,’ the blond man said,

‘talk about requirements.’

‘Well, I don’t have a shop as such,’ Collins began.

The blond man nodded. ‘Ah, silly me. Mail order, you did say.’

‘But you could drop by, and we could talk,’ Collins offered.

Collins didn’t play the record when he got home. He waited for an hour or two, allowing the anticipation to build. In the late-afternoon light, he carefully played a few of his other favourites: *Glen Cordry Sings, Southern Company* by Lionel Murray and Buddy Shaeffer, *All Gone Back To Blue* by Conrad Arthurs and the True-Notes, and a Lemon Pops Haggerty on an unusual format that Collins was sure had backing by the Clements Family.

Then he made a cup of tea, and reverentially placed *Talullah Blues* on the turntable. He lowered the cartridge by hand and heard the soft pop, part cat’s purr, part raindrop on paper, and the hush of warmth that was neither silence nor noise. Then the music started.

When Collins woke the next day, he realised that he was worried.

The collecting fraternity was not above scams. Collins had heard horror stories over the years of elaborate tricks and stings, of duplicity, of outright theft.

He’d never suffered any himself, apart from the odd had

experience with the likes of Gilbert, but he was wary. They all

were, all the collectors. That was why they were no guarded and

solitary in their habits.

The Doctor had seemed a pleasant enough fellow, and Collins

had been rather overwhelmed by the generosity of his gesture over the Ernest Cotton Ensemble. Now he'd had time to sleep on it and reflect. The Doctor and his girlfriend had been watching him, like con-artists measuring up their latest mark. How accidental had the encounter been the day before? Had the copy of *Talullah Blues* really been there all along, or was that just a sweetener, and part of the scam?

He'd invited the Doctor to his home. In a moment of weakness

and gratitude, perhaps precisely the effect the Doctor had intended by surrendering the record, Collins had permitted a rival to get too close. He thought about ringing to cancel the appointment, but he didn't have a number. He wondered if he should simply not answer the door when the knock came, but part of him really wanted to find out the measure of the scam.

Collins knew he was no pushover. Let the man come. If he tried

to pull a fast one, Collins would be ready.

The buzzer rang at eleven. Collins went down and opened the front door.

'Good morning,' the Doctor beamed. He wasn't alone. 'This is

Nyssa,' the Doctor said.

'Nice to meet you, Mr Coffins,' the girl said, nodding and

smiling.

Two of them. He should have expected as much. Double-play,

distract and lift. He'd have to keep his eye on both of them. The girl was carrying a large shoulder bag. *What are you hoping to slip into that while I'm not looking?* Collins mused.

'Come up,' he said.

He led them up through the lounge to the workroom beyond,

where he'd laid out a number of sample items on the fastidiously clean bench. He'd put coffee on, and the smell infused the air.

The Doctor and his girlfriend lingered in the doorway of the

workroom, admiring the lounge.

'What a lovely place,' the Doctor said. The skylights bathed the room in pale sunshine. Collins's prized system stood against one wall, a six pack preamp/amp series and power supply isolated on

spiked box-steel stands, single green lights steady, a turntable on a stand of its own, all wired up to the 50o watt per channel speakers with gold-plated jack leads. On the other side of the room, past the Eames chairs, the wall was lined with black medico boxes screwed to each other and the walls, and designed to house his record

collection.

'Thank you,' said Collins.

The Doctor wandered over to inspect the system.

'Very nice,' he said, bending down, 'Naim six-pack, am I right?

Beautiful. Linn table, stands spiked, of course, onto a concrete floor. Cables gold-plated, no long leads, no extraneous electronics in the room. Five hundred watt Isobariks. Linn too?'

'Yes,' said Collins, proudly. 'I had them custom made.'

'Separate EKOS tone-arm and... It's a Troika, isn't it, Mr

Collins? A Troika cartridge, beautifully balanced, and, of course, no lever.'

'You know your hi-fi,' said Collins.

The Doctor straightened up and shrugged. 'Oh, you know,' he

said, gesturing modestly.

'He's a bit of an expert,' said Nyssa.

‘Really?’ said Collins. ‘Coffee?’

‘Yes, please,’ said the Doctor.

Collins walked into the adjoining galley kitchen and poured the

coffee. He was taking a calculated risk leaving them alone, but he was able to watch them through the kitchen doorway. He wanted to see what they’d do, to see if they’d try something right off the bat.

He’d been careful to lock the front door after them.

Maybe they were armed? *No, that’s just silly*, he thought.

When he came back in with a tray, he found them admiring his

collection. They hadn’t touched anything that he could tell. They were just looking. He made a quick scan to see if anything was

missing. He knew everything, and where everything was supposed

to be.

‘ *Harlot Sweetheart*,’ said the Doctor.

‘Johnny Princeton and the Biloxi Four,’ Collins nodded.

‘Amazing. I’ve never seen one,’ the Doctor said.

‘I was lucky to get it’

And is that *Your Heart’s In The Mail* by Cary Spruce?’ the Doctor asked, peering at the shelves.

‘Yes, it is. Tom Mason on piano, Lyle Wallace on bass.’

‘And Philly Shore on drums,’ the Doctor said.

Collins was in the middle of handing the Doctor a cup of coffee.

He paused. ‘The drums were never credited.’

‘No, they wouldn’t be,’ the Doctor nodded, taking the cup with a nod.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Collins.

‘Shore was under contract with Golden Artists at the time, so he was moonlighting.’

‘How do you know that?’ Collins asked.

‘I thought it was common knowledge,’ the Doctor replied.

‘The drum credit on that recording has been the subject of debate for years,’ said Collins. ‘Some say Philly Shore, others say Rodney Wainwright. Others favour one of Toe-Tapper Studio’s session

drummers.’

‘Too good for a session drummer.’

‘I agree.’

‘It was definitely Philly Shore,’ said the Doctor. ‘I was...’ He hesitated. For a second, Collins was sure the Doctor was going to say ‘I was there’.

‘I was always of the opinion that it sounded like Shore,’ the

Doctor said.

‘This is excellent coffee, Mr Coffins,’ said Nyssa.

Collins paused. ‘Well, down to business, then,’ he said.

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor.

‘The service I offer is very straightforward. I can put together a first-class system for you, sourcing individual components from a wide range of suppliers using my own... expertise. It really depends on what you want, and what you want to do with it. A caveat, we’re talking about something high-end and expensive. I don’t mess

around.’

‘You’re the tweaker’s tweaker,’ the Doctor smiled.

‘Maybe you can start by telling me what you’re using at the

moment? Give me some idea of your needs.’

The Doctor took a sip of coffee. ‘I use a Konec Phonotron,’ he

said. Collins waited for a moment to hear the rest of the joke. He

chuckled in anticipation. Neither the Doctor nor the girl said

anything.

‘All right,’ Collins sighed as the chuckle faded. ‘Very nice.’ He put his cup down. ‘I’ll see you out.’

‘Why?’ asked Nyssa, frowning.

‘I’m not sure what your game is, and you did have me fooled for

a moment, but enough’s enough.’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Mr Coffins,’ said the Doctor.

‘Did your research, did you? Studied up carefully so you knew all the right terms and names? Well done, but you don’t really know

what you’re talking about, do you? A (once Phonotron? Please.’

‘I use a Konec Phonotron,’ the Doctor insisted.

‘He does,’ said Nyssa. ‘He has it set up in the Cloisters.’

‘It’s very reliable, and has the most wonderful reproduction

quality,’ the Doctor added.

Collins shook his head. ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but we’re done here.’
‘Why?’ asked the Doctor.

‘The Konec Phonotron was a revolutionary design built by Laszlo

Konec in 1961,’ said Collins. ‘It was apparently brilliant, quite brilliant, and might have changed audio technology, but it never went into commercial production because of market competition by the major manufacturers. Konec only ever built four prototypes,

none of which remain. He never secured a patent, and bin designs are lost’

‘I see how that would be a problem,’ the Doctor admitted.

‘Find the name in a book, did you? Thought it would impress

me? You should have read a little further.’ Collins gestured towards the door. ‘Please, I’ve got things to do.’

‘So have I,’ the Doctor replied.

118

Oh, here we go, Collins thought.

‘We got off on the wrong foot, and I’m sorry,’ the Doctor said.

‘Also, I haven’t been entirely honest with you, although it’s true that I have come to you for help.’

Collins didn’t reply. He stared at them. *Go, just go*, he willed.

Don’t make this even more awkward than it already is.

‘If we’d come up to you directly,’ said Nyssa, ‘and told you our actual business, you wouldn’t have believed us.’

‘We were just trying to, I don’t know, engage you,’ said the

Doctor. ‘Soften me up for the sting?’ Collins suggested. There was a tight, angry tone in his voice. ‘You’re after something I’ve got, aren’t you? Something in my collection. Is it something you’re after yourself, or has someone like Gilbert sent you to do his dirty work?’

‘Mr Collins,’ said the Doctor gently, ‘I’m not here to steal from you or rip you off. But you’re right. There is something in your collection that I want.’

‘Nothing’s for sale.’

‘I’m not here to buy it, Mr Collins. You’re going to give it to

me.’ Collins took a step backwards. ‘Is that a threat?’

The Doctor looked mortified. ‘A threat? Oh not Goodness, did

that come out sounding like a threat?’

‘Little bit,’ said Nyssa.

‘I really am so sorry,’ the Doctor exclaimed, looking at Collins. ‘I should have rehearsed this, shouldn’t l?’

‘As usual,’ Nyssa muttered.

‘Mr Collins, please…’ the Doctor said.

Collins stood his ground. There was a paperweight in grabbing range on the sideboard nearby. I could heft that m a weapon, if needs be, he thought.

‘Go on then, Doctor,’ he said. ‘Tell me. What is it you’re after?’

A record,’ the Doctor began. ‘Last week, on one of your outings, you found a record, a very rare, very valuable record.’

So that’s it. ‘I know the one you mean,’ said Collins warily.

‘You still have it?’

‘Of course. I’m not about to let something that precious go.’

‘Have you listened to it?’ the Doctor asked. There seemed to be considerable worry attached to the question.

‘Not yet,’ Collins replied.

‘Why not, may I ask?’

‘I’m not ready to,’ said Collins. ‘Sometimes, with a real find, you’ve got to wait for the right moment. Anticipation is part of the pleasure. You wouldn’t understand.’

‘I think I might,’ said the Doctor.

‘How did you know about it?’ asked Collins.

‘I’ve been hunting for it for years. It’s the only copy left.’

‘And it’s mine,’ said Collins. ‘Now, please, leave my home.’

‘ *Listen To The Beat* by Ronnie D. Clinton,’ said the Doctor.

‘That’s the one,’ Collins said.

‘A legendary lost recording by one of the most misunderstood blues artists of the 1940s,’ said the Doctor softly. ‘The man was only appreciated after his early death, and by that time, most of his work

had been lost. *Listen To The Beat* was his only commercial release.'

'It's priceless,' Collins agreed.

'It's not what it seems,' said the Doctor.

'What do you mean?'

'There's a reason why virtually none of Clinton's work survives,'

said the Doctor. 'Almost every example has been located and

removed.'

'Removed?' Collins laughed. 'By who?'

'By me,' said the Doctor. 'Over the years, as copies turned up,

I've tracked them down. Ronnie Clinton died young. What's on that record isn't his work. *Listen To The Beat* is a recording made by someone else, and released under Clinton's name.'

'That's ridiculous,' said Collins.

'It's the truth.'

'What's on it, then?' asked Collins.

'A sound. Just a sound. Something that should never be heard.

I'm asking you to give me your copy, Mr Collins.'

'Just like that? After a story like that? Get out!'

The Doctor looked across at Nyssa. She opened her shoulder bag

and took something out. The Doctor handed it to Collins.

'What is this?'

' *Ain't Got No Home To Go To* by Ronnie D. Clinton,' said the Doctor. 'He recorded it just before his death, a year before *Listen To The Beat* was released. It's genuine, and it's genuinely Ronnie Clinton. Quite wonderful. A favourite from my own collection.'

'I've never heard of it,' said Collins, studying the record.

'It's a sample pressing, never released. In its way, it's

significantly rarer than *Listen To The Beat*. It's yours.'

Collins looked at the Doctor. He felt a tingle. 'In exchange?'

'Yes.'

'No,' he said, handing the record back reluctantly. 'But I'll buy it from you.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'It's not for sale. Ah well, thank you for your time.'

The girl followed the Doctor towards the door.

'Wait,' said Collins. The tingle wouldn't go away. 'Wait a

minute,' he said.

He walked over to the medite cubes and took out a record. 'I

can't believe I'm doing this,' he sighed.

'Ifs the right thing to do,' the Doctor said.

Collins handed him the copy of Listen To The Beat.

'Thank you, Mr Collins,' said the Doctor. 'You've no idea what

this means.' He gave Ain't Got No Home lb Go To to Collins.

'We'll see ourselves out,' said Nyssa.

'How did you know I'd found it, Doctor?' asked Collins.

The Doctor shrugged. 'I had a tingle.'

After they had gone, Collins sat down and looked at the record

they'd given him. He wouldn't play it, not yet. Anticipation was part of the pleasure. The record was in good condition, considering its age. The plain paper sleeve had yellowed. Something had been handwritten on the corner, fading now.

It read: *To my pal the Doctor, thanks for everything, Ronnie.*

'You'll miss it, won't you?' asked Nyssa. 'Ain't Got No Home lb

Go' o was one of your favourites.'

'I will,' the Doctor admitted. 'Evenings around the Phonotron won't be the same.'

They stood for a moment in the rain at the corner of the street while the Doctor tried to remember where he had parked the TARDIS.

'And once again, you didn't explain,' said Nyssa. 'You get us into these situations without explaining things to me first.'

'Do I?' he replied. 'I thought I had.'

'I had no idea what was going on, Doctor,' Nyssa said.

'There's not much to tell,' the Doctor replied. 'What do you want to know?'

'This record. What's on it?'

'Ahh,' said the Doctor. 'Well, ideas, really. Insidious, infectious ideas, carefully encoded into the grooves. Playing the record would release the ideas and transmit them into the listener's mind. And it wouldn't stop there. Once infected, that person would pass the ideas to the next, and the next, and the next.'

'Like mass hypnosis?'

'Exactly like that.' The Doctor took the record out of Nyssa's bag and looked at it. 'This is, quite simply, a terrible and subtle weapon designed to bring human culture crashing down overnight.'

'Why hide it on an obscure recording?' asked Nyssa.

'Oh, that's the really cunning part,' said the Doctor. 'If the ideas had been concealed on a more popular or famous recording, they

would have been easier to track down. Putting them on something this esoteric made them much harder to detect and stop. It's

stealthy, sneaky, wilfully sly.'

He glanced at her and grinned. 'Come on, there's a supernova in

46 Hydra I need to drop this into.'

'But what exactly is on it?' Nyssa asked, hurrying after him.

'Just a voice,' the Doctor replied. 'His Master's.'

122

Link

Pete Kempshall

An adventure of the Third Doctor, with Sarah Jane

Brok hefted the combat knife, the fury inside him as sharp and

glittering as the serrated blade.

He stabbed down.

Sticky wetness sprayed into his face, forcing him to wipe his eyes clear with his free hand. He licked his fingers and grimaced.

He hadn't signed up for this. He'd spent six years in the Royal

Guard, served proudly in campaigns from Ergath's Moon to Rursus

Antulore.

He shouldn't be serving in a galley.

Twisting the knife in a tight circle, he removed the lid from the canister and slopped out the contents. It was supposed to be orshank stew but the brown, congealed muck spitting venomously from the

heat of the pan might as well be... well, he knew what it tasted like.

Brok stirred the thick paste, unable to get the flavour out of his mouth. There was no way of knowing how long they'd all be stuck

on this planet – 'straight in, straight out' they'd been told at the briefing. He snorted. Bad enough to trap fighting men on a ship this size, but to give them only this crud to eat... they'd be at each other's throats by dawn. He could already hear them, just within earshot –

muttering.

He thumped across to the storeroom. He'd have to find a herb or

a spice to take the edge off the acrid taste. He appraised the ranks of rations and sighed bitterly.

The metal containers were standardised military issue: four

different sizes, but all the same shape, all the same colour. If not for the labels there'd be no way of knowing their contents. Whoever

had loaded the shelves hadn't bothered to make sure the labels were facing the front. If he wanted to find out what was inside, he was going to have to turn each and every tin around.

'FORGAM ROOT'. Huh, not bloody likely. He was trying to

make it taste better, not worse. 'VESNIX OIL'. That was more like it – he put it to one side and reached for the next tin.

123

'XCOPN'. What the hell was xcopn? He took down another.

'FDGEWUF'. He'd never heard of half this stuff.

Cursing, Brok scooped up a couple of tins and stamped back to

the galley. He'd try a bit of all of them. After all, he'd already tasted the stew... how much worse could he make it?

'Ooh, it gives me the creeps. Like the *Marie Celeste* or something.'

The recreation room had been abandoned quickly: Sarah noted

three of the chairs around the central table had been toppled over in the rush and food from dropped bowls lay scattered across the floor.

It was strange to think it, but to Sarah the most normal thing in the room was the TARDIS, tessellating perfectly with the corner. 'What do you think happened?'

'Some sort of emergency, obviously.' The Doctor ran a gloved

finger along the tabletop. 'Not too long ago either. No time for anything to get dusty.'

‘There’s no mould on the food,’ Sarah pointed out.

The Doctor sniffed the air. It had a tang to it like ozone. ‘No, no, there wouldn’t be.’

Sarah was about to ask what he meant, but the Doctor was

already on the move. Two buttons were recessed into a panel next to the door, and he pushed the top one. The door hissed to one side.

‘Don’t just stand there grumbling, Sarah,’ he called. ‘We won’t

learn much standing about here, will we?’

‘I wasn’t grumbling,’ Sarah protested, slipping through the door after him. ‘Didn’t say a word...’

Strange, she thought, how quickly poking around in hazardous

alien environments had become second nature to her. She’d always been curious: you didn’t end up a journalist if you didn’t enjoy sniffing out a story. But now... it was like the Doctor’s curiosity amplified her own, driving her into situations she’d have run a mile from not that long ago. The things she could write about now...

Shame no magazine on Earth would print them. She could always

disguise her tales as fiction, she supposed.

‘Sarah.’

The Doctor had stopped a couple of paces ahead of her. A large

door was set into the wall, solid and forbidding. Adjacent to it the metal of the wall became thick glass, a window that stretched the remaining length of the corridor. The Doctor peered through it,

fascinated.

The woman on the bed was so still that Sarah thought she was

dead. It took a moment to spot the slight rising and falling of her chest, but even then Sarah would have said the pretty teenager was closer to passing away than to waking up.

‘What do you think’s wrong with her?’ Sarah asked.

‘I’d say she’s in a coma of some sort,’ the Doctor answered. ‘The real question, I should imagine, is what put her into it in the first place.’

‘Well let’s have a look,’ Sarah decided, reaching out to the door.

The Doctor shot out a hand, seized her wrist. ‘Just a minute.’ He gestured, directing Sarah’s attention to the door frame. ‘The room’s been vacuum-sealed It’s probably completely sterile. Break the seal and you’ll expose yourself to whatever’s wrong with that poor girl.’

‘You think it’s a disease?’

‘Well obviously it’s hard to tell from out here, but I can’t see any sign of physical trauma on her, can you?’

‘Not really, no.’

‘And that taste in the air,’ he sniffed. ‘Residue from a

decontamination protocol of some sort. Someone else obviously

thinks there’s a contagion at work.’

‘So what do we do then?’ Sarah asked.

‘Well the decontamination means we’re perfectly safe out here...

If we can get to the bridge, we might find something that can

answer –’

He stopped, one finger shooting to his lips, another pointing to a bend a little way up the corridor.

A chill crept into Sarah’s bones. ‘What?’ she hissed.

‘You really should come out, old chap,’ the Doctor called out

brazenly. ‘We’re here to help.’

Nothing.

The Doctor strode boldly to the corner, turned... and puzzlement flashed across his face. The corridor was empty.

Tension flooded from Sarah. ‘Bit jumpy, aren’t we?’

‘I’m nothing of the sort,’ the Doctor retaliated. ‘There was

definitely somebody there. I could feel them watching.’

‘Oh, you mean like a sixth sense,’ she mocked gently.

A rueful look settled on the Doctor’s face. ‘Yes, well maybe I am feeling a little on edge. But I assure you it’s with good reason.’

‘You really think someone’s watching us?’

‘I don’t doubt it for a second.’

‘I’m going to look back the way we came. Maybe I can find a way

around.’

Their progress had been arrested by an intimidating blast door, a sign next to it emblazoned with the words ‘AUTHORJSED

PERSONNEL ONLY: SECURITY CLEARANCE LEVEL NINE

REQUIRED’. Taking the warning as proof they were on the right

track, the Doctor had been trying to finesse the door open for the 125

past ten minutes – and quite frankly Sarah was bored silly. If she could find a way round the door... well, she’d love to see his face when he got it open and found her waiting on the other side.

‘Are you listening, Doctor?’

‘Hmm.’

‘I said I’m going to see if can get the engines started,’ Sarah

deadpanned. ‘Take the ship for a quick spin.’

‘Hmm.’

Sarah sighed and wandered back the way they had come. She

passed the rec room and followed the corridor until she arrived at the hatch. She’d have thought a door that opened onto the outside world would feature a complex airlock system. She was surprised to see it

was just a thin-looking metal affair with a window in it: tightly sealed but disappointingly basic. She pressed her face to the window. Beyond the glass, a meadow stretched away in the

sunlight, open space gradually changing into dense woodland.

Knee-high grass, speckled with carmine blooms, eddied gently in

the wind. ‘It’s beautiful,’ Sarah murmured. ‘Like a field of

poppies.’

For someone whose previous experience of alien worlds was

limited to the dank surface of Exxilon and Peladon’s grim caverns, the scene was irresistible. Before she could stop herself; she pressed the top button on the panel next to the door, just as she had seen the Doctor do in the recreation room. The hatch swung open, hinged at the base to form a gangway off the ship as it descended.

Sun beat down on her face. She closed her eyes and soaked up the warmth, taking slow, deep breaths of air scented with exotic pollen.

All at once, an uneasy feeling swept over her – like she was being stared at. She opened her eyes and there he was: a figure, some

distance away, face covered by a hooded tunic but unmistakeably

watching her. He stood for the merest of beats then bolted away

through the grass.

‘Hey! Stop!’ Sarah called after him. ‘I just want to talk!’

But the figure only ran faster. Within moments he was at the tree line then he was gone.

Sarah slapped her palms against her sides in frustration. The first person she’d seen since they got here – well, the first one not in a coma, anyway – and she’d let him run away without getting any

answers. Still, at least she had something to tell the Doctor now. He couldn’t be accused of paranoia if there really was someone

watching them.

The access light over the door switched from red to green, and the

Doctor replaced the some screwdriver in his jacket. ‘There you are,
126

Sarah. A job well done, if I say so myself.’ He looked over his

shoulder. Sarah was gone. The Doctor grumped. All that effort to unseal the door... now he was going to have to go looking for that blasted girl without even getting the chance to open it first. Well, he considered, perhaps a quick look. He punched the ‘open’ key next to the door – it shrieked aside and he peered through. The barrel of an extremely well-used blaster rifle returned his gaze, unblinking.

Sarah waited another half an hour, just in case the figure returned, but whoever he was, she’d scared him off good and proper.

While she’d waited, she’d walked a quick circuit of the ship.

Funny, it looked much smaller from the outside... then again, there was a lot of that about- As she walked, she had noticed there was no obvious damage to the hull, and as the as she could tell from the scorched circle of grass underneath the ship it had made a perfectly good landing. So why was it abandoned? She shivered. The sun was setting. Time to go back and see how the Doctor was doing with

that door.

With a sigh, she plodded up the ramp and sealed the hatch behind her.

‘Hands up, where I can see them.’

The Doctor raised his arms. ‘I beg your pardon. I was looking for the ship’s captain.’

The gunman was clad from head to foot in a sturdy environment

suit – the kind, the Doctor noted, that heavy assault troops used.

‘The sign. Left of the door,’ the soldier barked, voice reverberating inside his helmet. ‘What does it say?’

‘Ah yes, that. I do apologise for dropping in unannounced but I

rather thought ‘

‘ *What does it say?* ’ The soldier’s tone bordered on the hysterical.

‘“Authorised Personnel Only”,’ the Doctor read. ‘“Security

Clearance Level Nine Required”.’

‘How did you get here?’

‘I have my own ship.’

‘Then how did you get aboard?’ the soldier countered.

The Doctor rubbed the side of his nose with a long finger.

‘Would you believe I just... materialised?’

‘You’ve got a matter transporter?’ the crewman gaped.

‘Something like that, yes.’

‘But they’re still only experimental. Our techs aren’t even near to issuing them yet!’

‘Nonetheless...’ the Doctor said. He noticed the barrel of the gun drop slightly.

‘And you’ve definitely not been outside?’

‘No. Now let’s start again, shall we? I’m the Doctor and –’

The gun was aimed at the floor now. The soldier stepped forward, and for the first time the Doctor got a look at the face behind the helmet’s visor. The man was desperate, grimy and exhausted. He

couldn’t have been out of the suit for days.

‘You’re a doctor?’ the soldier gabbled. ‘I’m sorry, I had to be

sure. I mean you might be –’

‘Infected?’ the Doctor guessed. The soldier rewarded him with a

nod, confirming the suspicion he’d held ever since seeing the

patient in the isolation room and tasting the sterile flavour of the ship’s air. ‘You’ll be happy to know I’m clean as a whistle.

‘So, Lieutenant...’ The Doctor’s eyes dropped to the patch on the left

breast of the soldier's spacesuit, 'Hrinth. Why don't you take me back to the bridge and tell me what's been going on.'

Sarah was not at all shocked to return to the blast door, only to find it standing open and the Doctor gone. 'Thanks for waiting,' she

muttered, knowing she was being ungracious. After all, she hadn't waited for him...

Beyond the blast door the corridor branched left and right. She

knew the Doctor would be heading for the bridge but which way

was that?

Still, as the Doctor had said earlier, she wasn't going to learn anything standing about. Choosing a direction she strode off to find her friend.

'The first we heard about it was at the briefing back on Arrada,'

Hrinth said. He and the Doctor were sealed on the flight deck – the Doctor had noted from the sign on the way in that security clearance here was level ten, presumably making this the most impregnable

room on the ship.

Only when he was inside his fortress did Hrinth remove his

helmet and set down the gun, although both remained within easy

reach – military-issue comfort blankets.

'The Royal Family put a gag order on it, see? If the people found out Princess Catra had gone missing, well, there'd be chaos.'

The Doctor sat, feet up on a desk, fingers steepled under his chin.

'So this Princess Catra was on her way to marry whom, exactly?'

'Prince Strobel of Voita. We've been fighting the Voitans... must be three years now, on and off. Marrying the Princess to Strobel was going to end the war. Command told us if we couldn't bring her back we shouldn't bother coming back.'

'I see. And your commanders suspected foul play?'

Hrinth nodded. ‘Turns out it was just a tech failure. The drive

went into high warp all on its own, then burned out in the middle of nowhere. The ship was caught in this planet’s gravity, with no

power to pull free.

‘Our landing party found the wreckage. Everyone was dead

except the princess – she was in a coma when the team found her.’

‘You weren’t on the landing party?’ the Doctor queried.

‘No, I’m bridge crew. Didn’t have much to do with the enlisteds.’

‘And when the rescue party brought the princess back, your chief medical officer couldn’t find anything wrong with her,’ the Doctor prompted.

‘No injuries, nothing at all. He said she’d been infected with

something, ordered the captain not to leave the planet until he could find out what. We couldn’t risk taking whatever it was back to

Arrada.’

‘But the disease killed everyone before he could analyse it

properly,’ the Doctor concluded.

‘Well that’s the thing,’ Hrinth said. ‘Everyone died all right, but it wasn’t the disease that killed them.’

Sarah had passed several doors before she started to have doubts.

Some were locked, others led into more abandoned rooms, but none of them showed any sign the Doctor had been past. She must have

gone the wrong way back at the blast door. This section of the ship had direction signs like the other one, but they were written in a different language – gobbledegook, as far as Sarah was concerned.

So, press on, or head back and go the other way?

A slight, prickling feeling materialised on her neck. Small hairs were rising there, nature’s early warning system.

She looked further up the passage, could see no one, but the

conviction remained. Someone was there. Watching.

She started back the way she'd come, quickening her pace. She'd

been careless when she'd been outside. She'd walked around the

ship, out of sight of the gangway for a minute or two. And she'd left the door open.

Someone had slipped aboard. She knew it, knew it beyond any

doubt because now she didn't just feel like someone was watching her.

Now she could hear them whispering.

'Reading was the first thing to go. The men who'd gone out onto

the surface just –' Hrinth paused. 'I don't know, just stopped being able to make sense of the letters.'

'That's why you asked me to read the sign outside the bridge,'

the Doctor said. 'Not to make a point about trespassers, to make sure I understood the words.'

'The lads had been putting it down to fatigue,' Hrinth continued.

'Either way, we didn't figure it out until Trooper Brok poisoned everyone.

'He was on galley duty... hated it, he did, but someone had to

cook if we were here for the duration. Anyway, all the containers down there are standard issue, they all look the same. Brok can't have been able to read the labels, mixed granx poison into the

rations by mistake. I was on watch, so I didn't eat, nor did a couple of others. Everyone else...'

'What happened to the others who didn't eat?' the Doctor asked.

'They all got sick. I was the only one who hadn't been out on the surface.' The Doctor noticed Hrinth was shaking inside his

spacesuit. He had no idea how long the lieutenant had been alone on the ship, terrified of losing his ability to read, to speak... to connect with anyone ever again. However long it had been, it was long

enough to push Hrinth right to the edge.

'They couldn't read,' Hrinth said. 'Then they started to hear

voices, see things that weren't there. They stopped being able to talk after that. Then they just left. Opened the exterior hatch and walked away.'

'All right, old chap, you're safe now,' the Doctor said soothingly.

'Let's try to find a way to get you home, shall we?'

'I can't go borne.'

'Whyever not?'

'We're Royal Guard. If we went back without the princess, we'd

be dishonoured. So would our families. And there's only one

punishment for that.'

'I imagine your senior officers think that motivates the troops.'

The Doctor could barely conceal his disgust. 'Well then we'd better get started on a cure for the princess, hadn't we?'

Sarah fought hard not to run. The voices came and went, each time closer, louder than the last. It puzzled her: if the natives were following her, surely they'd be stealthier about it? Or perhaps they just didn't care if she heard them or not

She had to find the Doctor – quickly.

She bustled around a corner and straight into a dead end. An even bigger blast door closed off the corridor ahead than the one that had given the Doctor such a hard time earlier.

She spun around, facing the way she'd come, back pressed to the

door as if force of will alone could move her through the metal. It couldn't be long now until her stalkers caught up – the last time 130

she'd heard them they'd sounded as if they were right on top of her.

Blinded by panic, she started pounding on the door with her fists.

The alarm bleeped quietly but insistently. Hrinth clumped across to a console. 'Someone's trying to get in.' He toggled a switch and a screen above his head flickered into life.

The Doctor leapt to his feet as the image resolved into a young

woman, thumping at the door in terror. 'It's Sarah Jane!' He strode to the door. 'You must let her in, Lieutenant.'

'No,' Hrinth said. The Doctor shot him a look that made the

officer cringe away involuntarily. He pointed to the communication controls. 'Ask her about the sign.'

The Doctor switched on the intercom. 'Sarah! Can you hear me?'

'Doctor?' On the screen, Sarah had stopped pounding and was

looking around wildly. 'Doctor, where are you?'

'I'm just on the other side of the door –'

'You have to open it!' Sarah shrieked. 'I'm being followed,

they're almost here, you have to –'

'Listen to me, Sarah, I need you to do something very important.'

The Doctor's voice exuded calm authority. 'There's a sign next to the door there. I need you to take a deep breath and read it to me.'

The Doctor watched Sarah rein in her fear. 'I can't,' her voice

drifted back. 'I don't understand the language.'

Hrinth held the Doctor's gaze. He raised his gun.

'Doctor, please! Open the door!'

The Doctor placed his hand on the muzzle, pushed the gun down

again. 'Put your helmet on. Whatever's affecting her, you'll be safe from it in that suit of yours.'

‘Doctor! Hurry!’

‘But you won’t,’ said Hrinth, clicking on the headpiece. ‘Open

that door and you’ll be infected!’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor agreed.

And taking a deep breath, he hit the access control.

Sarah sat in the sick bay, one bed down from the small blonde she now knew to be a princess. If she was going to get sick, she mused, may as well get the royal treatment.

The Doctor drew back, carefully stowing the blood sample he’d

taken from her. ‘All done,’ he smiled reassuringly. ‘We’ll have you right as rain in no time.’

She returned the smile, hoping he couldn’t see that it wavered oh-so-slightly. ‘So you can cure it then? Whatever this is?’

‘There’s hope, yes,’ he replied. ‘I have more sophisticated

equipment in the TARDIS that should identify the pathogen – I’m

going back there now to run some more tests.’ He tweaked her

gently on the cheek. ‘Chin up.’

She watched him leave, and she thought she saw the man in the

passageway – the one the Doctor had called Hrinth – shrink away

from him as he passed.

The Doctor had explained how the illness would develop. To her

credit, she hadn’t broken down. But to think... All those things she’d seen with the Doctor, a whole universe of experience opened up for her, and she’d never be able to share it with anyone, whether she presented it as fact or fiction. She was a journalist, words defined her. Without them she’d be nothing.

In her time as a writer, she’d met a number of people struck down by

disabilities, robbed of physical talents they saw as fundamental parts of their being. Athletes confined to wheelchairs, artists blinded

– and as many of them as she'd met, they'd all overcome their loss, found new ways to do what they loved. They'd fought on and won.

But they'd done it with the help of others. Losing language, that didn't just deprive Sarah of her essence, it made it impossible to communicate with anyone who could help her recover.

She'd be trapped in a body, entirely unable to express herself.

Utterly alone.

She stared at Princess Catra, still sleeping peacefully. When the time came, Sarah hoped she'd be equally oblivious to all she'd lost The Doctor frowned. He'd used the most advanced medical devices

the TARDIS had to offer but had found no evidence of pathogens in either Sarah's or Catra's blood samples.

Whatever was causing the illness wasn't being transmitted by

viral or bacterial means.

He plugged his sonic screwdriver into the console and flicked a

couple of switches, downloading the data he'd scanned from the

two patients. Reading from a small screen, he raised an eyebrow.

'That's rather interesting,' he muttered. He ran a finger across the display, tallying and comparing statistics.

Whatever was causing the problem was chemically altering the

brains of the infected, shutting down the centres that process

language. But there was more to it– while the sickness reduced

some elements of brain function, it appeared to be enhancing

others...

'Of course!' the Doctor exclaimed. Operating the door control, he swept out of the TARDIS, leaving the screwdriver protruding from the console.

* * *

132

Sarah stirred – someone was moving in the room. Her heart leapt–it could only mean the Doctor was back. Hrinth would crawl over

broken glass to the other side of the planet rather than come through that airlock...

She opened her eyes and sat up, looking at the door. No one was

there. Puzzled, she ran a hand through her hair and swung her legs off the bed.

Catra sat staring at her from across the room, eyes dark and wide in a face as pale as death itself. Sarah gave a little start. ‘Oh, you scared the life out of me! My name’s Sarah. You’ve been quite ill, Princess...’

Slowly Catra raised an arm until it was parallel with the deck.

Her hand hung limply at the wrist as it lifted, then turned palm upwards and beckoned languidly.

Sarah’s skin tingled. ‘I should call the Doctor,’ she blustered.

Movement drew her eyes to the corner. A man stood there,

dressed identically to the one she had seen in the field outside, his face hidden by a rough hood. He stepped forward, and Sarah

instinctively stepped away, feeling the backs of her thighs bump into the bed. ‘Who are you? How did you get in here?’ she

demanded.

Sarah shot a look through the window into the corridor. Hrinth

stood, back to her, oblivious to what was going on.

The hooded man moved closer, raising his hands to his head. He

clasped the outer edge of the garment and drew it back from his

face. Air wheezed in and out of a small, puckered mouth but it was the rest of the man’s features that forced the scream up into Sarah’s

throat.

He had none.

Everything was missing – nose, eyes, ears, all lost to a smooth, uninterrupted expanse of skin that started above the mouth,

stretched over the crown of his head and continued to the base of the skull.

Hrinth watched, agog. The woman was screaming her lungs out,

flailing at empty air and almost knocking the unconscious princess off her bed – hallucinating, just like the others had. Fleetingly he considered going in there to help her before she injured herself. But she was hysterical... what if somehow she punctured his suit?

He turned and ran as fast as his bulky spacesuit would allow,

trotting in the direction the Doctor had taken when he left to make his analysis. He was in time to see him striding out of the rec room, stonily determined.

'Your friend,' Hrinth panted, breath fogging his visor. 'It's

started.'

Without a word, the Doctor swept past him, and Hrinth found

himself forced to jog just to keep up. Even the airlock doors leading into the sickbay couldn't slow the man down – the Doctor marched through them and into the room beyond as if they weren't there.

Seizing Sarah by the shoulders, the Doctor spoke to her in tones that managed both to soothe and command. 'Sarah Jane, listen to

me. You're seeing things. None of this is real...'

Sarah sobbed with relief as the Doctor powered into the sickbay and grabbed her. The faceless creature retreated instantly, slinking back into the corner. She was safe.

Then, without warning her stomach contracted, icy panic flooded

her limbs. The Doctor was looking down at her, telling her to be calm,

that everything was going to be all right. She knew that was what he was saying because she could see it in his eyes. But while she could also see the Doctor's lips moving, she couldn't interpret the sounds.

Whatever he was saying was just noise. Completely meaningless.

Hrinth watched as Sarah sagged at the knees – the Doctor was only just able to take her weight before she hit the floor. He hefted her to a vacant bed and quickly assessed her vitals, although Hrinth

already knew what he would find.

She was in a coma, dormant, just like the princess.

In an instant, the Doctor was through the airlock and away down

the passageway, back towards the rec room. Caught on the hop,

Hrinth hustled after him.

'Where are you going?' he called out.

'To test a theory,' the Doctor's voice drifted back.

Hrinth was surprised to find himself wishing the Doctor would

fill him in on what he was planning and give him the opportunity to help rather than leave him constantly trailing in his wake. That said, the greater part of him was happy to be kept in the dark – where there was no chance of him being exposed to the virus.

Rounding a bend, Hrinth was in time to see the Doctor's velvet-

coated back disappearing past the rec room in the direction of the exterior hatch. He wasn't in time to stop him opening it.

The Doctor felt Hrinth arrive at his shoulder, heard his shouts of alarm as the lieutenant saw what was waiting outside the ship. But the Doctor only acknowledged him when he heard the cocking of

the huge blaster rifle.

'Don't be a fool, man,' he snapped, positioning himself between

Hrinth and his targets. 'They're not here to hurt you.'

He stood at the top of the gangway and looked out across the

field. There had to be a hundred of them out there, unmoving, their eyeless faces directed towards the ship. Some, he noticed, had their heads tilted slightly to one side. ‘Remarkable,’ he said. ‘Their body language is exactly the same as if they had ears.’

‘What do they want?’

‘Oh, the princess, I should think.’

‘Get out of the way, Doctor,’ Hrinth ordered, voice quavering.

The Doctor placed a hand on Hrinth’s shoulder, a gesture of

conciliation. ‘I really think you should leave this to me.’ Hrinth slumped to the deck, rifle clattering down the ramp. The Doctor

flexed his fingers. He hadn’t been sure that would work through the spacesuit.

Then facing back towards the field, he opened his mind.

It overtakes him quickly, not having to alter him in the same way it had Sarah or the Arradans – his mind is already attuned. Amenable.

It’s like a window, shutters flung wide to let in the sun. And it’s beautiful.

The Doctor lets his consciousness drift, mindful to maintain his own identity as it mixes and merges with… everything. The people in the field, the grass they stand on, the insects that scurry in that grass

– he can feel it all.

He can feel it all.

It would be so simple to let go, to merge his essence with every living thing on this world. To become one. That’s what the world wants him to do. Fighting it only disturbs the balance.

Instantly he’s drawn to a squall in the ocean of being. Sarah, her mind thrashing like a fish in a net. There’s a presence near her, calming her, soothing her.

Catra.

The princess flits amongst the other minds, her own subtly different but

joyously accepted. She sings of freedom, of relief from the burdens placed on her by her people. She's absolutely at peace.

The Doctor senses a request from her, a need. Focusing, he

transmits a single thought.

'Yes.'

Her ecstasy explodes like a supernova, bathing the Doctor in light.

And she is gone. The Doctor alters the pattern of his brain's theta waves. There's a sharp pain.

He stood on the gangway, his light-headedness dissipating, and

looked out at the non-faces of the natives gathered in the field.

Knowing what had to be done, the Doctor stepped back aboard the

ship, ensuring Hrinth was clear of the hatch before closing it. He didn't bother retrieving the gun.

Sarah's head pulsed – she could actually feel it expand and shrink with each heartbeat.

'Easy, Sarah Jane,' the Doctor said.

'I can... I can understand you.'

'Yes,' the Doctor replied, 'and you should find you're able to

read perfectly well again, too.'

'You found a cure!'

'Well, I wouldn't call it a cure, Sarah. That would presuppose

you've been suffering from a disease.'

She sat and stared at him – she was just too tired to rise to the bait.

'You see, the reason the Arradans couldn't identify the virus that was incapacitating them is that there never was one. Rather they were exposed to something like... well, more like a pheromone.'

‘Oh come off it,’ she smirked. ‘Those things that make you attractive to other people?’

‘Something similar, yes. In this case a chemical that saturates every living thing on this planet. Anyone leaving the ship for any length of time would be exposed.’

‘And fall in love with each other.’

‘Joke all you like, but you’re actually not far wrong. Every organism on this planet is linked by a mental energy, an unseen spirit that informs them all. The various species here have evolved to communicate solely through that spiritual link.’

‘Which is why the people have no eyes or ears,’ Sarah offered.

‘Exactly. But that means they have no other way to interact. So when the Arradans arrived the natives couldn’t communicate with them. The planet reacted by sending out waves of chemicals that altered the Arradan brain functions, enabling them to send and receive telepathically.’

‘But that took away their language-processing skills.’

‘The chemical has side effects on Arradan physiology – and human, for that matter. For Arradans to have the mental capacity required for telepathic contact, certain areas of the brain considered redundant are shut down. The voices, the feelings of being watched, the hallucinations, meanwhile, were all failed attempts by the natives to broadcast their thoughts.’

‘Like knocks on the door,’ Sarah gasped. ‘An invitation to talk to them.’

‘First contact,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Unfortunately the chemical not only destroys the capacity for language, it eventually sends

worlders' bodies into shock.'

'Coma,' Sarah murmured. 'Hang on – you felt like you were

being watched and you never went outside to be exposed to the

chemical.'

'Ah, but my brain is already tailored for psychic communication.

I was merely picking up weakened signals with the equipment I

already had.'

Sarah shook her head. 'So how did you...?'

'A simple chemical blocker. Inject it and it prevents any further variation in the brain functions.'

'Well you'd better hurry up and give some to Sleeping Beauty,'

Sarah laughed. 'I don't think there'll be a handsome prince along with true love's kiss any time soon.'

Then she saw the expression on the Doctor's face and quickly fell silent.

'But you cured *her*!' Hrinth spat the word so hard that Sarah recoiled like she'd been hit. She almost toppled another of the rec room's chairs. 'If it worked on her it'll work on the princess!'

'I'm afraid not,' the Doctor said coolly. 'For one thing, Princess Catra has been under the influence of the planet for much longer than Sarah. And for another, she doesn't want to come back.'

Sarah thought Hrinth's eyes would explode from their sockets.

'She has to come back! If she doesn't... I can't go back to Arrada without her!'

'If I were to administer the blocking serum to Catra now, the

effect could be devastating,' the Doctor continued. 'Her mind is so well-integrated to the planet's gestalt that tearing it away is likely to cause permanent brain damage. She would wake up, but the

language centres of her brain would almost certainly never recover.'

‘But she’d be alive?’ Hrinth asked.

‘She’d be mobile, but she’d be utterly unable to communicate

with the outside world. Whatever makes her Princess Catra would

be trapped inside her body, unable to interact with anyone.’

‘But her people need her!’

‘Her people are here now. You have to understand that she’s

happy here. More than she ever was on Arrada. Surrounded by

plotters and sycophants, driven into a marriage she didn’t want, then forced to pretend she was happy about it – here there’s no need for words: you can see into the souls of every living thing. Complete transparency – no anger, no lies, no division. All the things that made her life unpleasant on Arrada simply don’t exist here. For the first time in her life she’s free. Taking that away from her would be like dragging someone back from the gates of heaven.’

Sarah took Hrinth’s hand. ‘We can take you home in the

TARDIS. Get you and your family off Arrada before anyone even

knows what’s happened. As far as anyone there is concerned,

everyone on the mission will be dead, including the princess. You’ll be free, just like Catra.’

‘What’ll happen to her?’ Hrinth asked.

‘The locals are waiting outside to take her,’ the Doctor theorised.

‘From what I gather they’ve been watching the ship ever since you took her aboard, waiting for you to return her.

‘She’ll never wake up properly. But they’ll feed her, take care of her – I imagine they’re already caring for the crewmen that

wandered off to join them before. She’ll be happy, Lieutenant.’

Hrinth sagged. ‘You can take me and my family anywhere?

Sarah beamed. ‘Anywhere!’

‘I’ll... I’ll just get my things from the bridge,’ he stood up slowly, as if the deck were tilting under him. ‘I won’t be long.’

‘Take as long as you need.’ The Doctor watched him go with sad

eyes.

‘He’ll be all right, won’t he?’ Sarah asked.

‘Yes. Yes, I’m sure he will. But it’ll be hard for him and his

family. They’ll never be able to go back to Arrada.’

‘I feel sorry for the rest of the Arradans,’ Sarah said. ‘Their peace treaty’s useless now.’

The Doctor smiled mischievously. ‘Well maybe we can do

something about that too, after we’ve dropped Hrinth off.’

The scream shattered the silence. The Doctor was out of the door before the shudder had left Sarah’s spine. She sprinted after him, passed a porthole, and skidded to a halt. Outside in the field she could see the natives. They were turning and walking away.

The Doctor snapped his fingers in front of Catra’s face. Her eyes stared into middle distance, unresponsive. He stood from his

crouch, straightened his jacket and glared at Hrinth, who still

gripped the syringe that the Doctor had meant for him.

‘Well I hope you’re happy now, Lieutenant.’

Hrinth drew himself up to his full height. Sarah still thought he looked like a child defying his parent ‘I did what had to be done.

The marriage can go ahead now.’

‘But you destroyed her mind!’ Sarah cried.

‘She’s a symbol. The marriage can go ahead. The treaty can be

signed.’

The Doctor drew forward menacingly, more frightening in

Sarah's opinion for the quietness of his voice. 'All those weeks spent cowering on the flight deck, terrified of losing the ability to 138

understand others... and when it's finally secured for you, you

refuse to listen.'

Hrinth tried to stand even straighter. 'I did my duty!'

'Then very well done to you, sir,' the Doctor said. 'Very well

done indeed.'

Catra floated amongst the minds of the people, touching them, knowing them with an intimacy she'd never experienced physically.

They loved her, completely and unreservedly, as she loved them. She exulted, swept up with bliss.

Then the old mind was there next to her, guiding her.

'It's time,' it said.

She wanted to cry but that was a physical response, useless here.

Reaching out with her essence, she touched as many of the planet's spirits as she could, even as she felt herself withdrawing from them.

As she drifted away from the mind-sea, she spoke to the old mind.

'Thank you. For giving me the chance to say goodbye.'

And all was dark.

The Doctor disconnected the TARDIS telepathic circuits from

Catra's mind. Sarah watched him stalk around the central console, flicking switches and checking readings. In absolute silence, he dematerialised the ship, staring into the time rotor as it rose and fell.

She wished she could make it better for him, cheer him up

somehow, but she couldn't think of anything to say that would

make a difference.

Words failed her.

Driftwood

Dale Smith

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Mel

If you were there and you closed your eyes, you'd still be able to picture the scene. There was the static hiss of the waves pulling the shale into the sea and back again, sweeping in, sweeping out. There was the predatory caw of seagulls circling overhead: too far to be a nuisance; close enough to swoop should food be left unattended.

You might even imagine you could hear the sun as it fell lazily into the sea, and the crabgrass rustling in the breeze; so peaceful was the beach that morning.

If you kept your eyes closed, you would feel a delicate breeze

tugging at your clothes as if trying to tell you there was no need for them. And you'd feel the warmth, too, seeping through cloth, skin, bone until all was gently shining in the sun. Then you'd realise you were missing the sunset, and you'd open your eyes and smile.

And, ifyou were there, you'd throw your arms wide and fly into

the sky to join the gulls as they banked and cawed.

There, in the sky, you'd see golden sand spreading out unbroken

in either direction, forming a gentle barrier between the crystal sea and the dusty land. The sea was cool and smooth, barely a wave

breaking the surface. Some brave sand pioneers had – somehow –

climbed the dunes to spread themselves like dew on the crabgrass.

The grass didn't mind – it wasn't farmland and it wasn't cattle-

fodder: why should it worry, on such a beautiful evening?

And, if you were there, you'd swoop – once, twice, again – and

you'd dive at the soft sand, spinning up and away again before your nose scraped it. And then you'd fly away. You'd see the beach race with you, blurring to nothing but still the overall sense of sand and

sea and grass. You'd spin, your mouth open to taste the sunlight, and who wouldn't forgive you if you let out a whoop of pure joy at the feeling?

And you'd hear the tap-tap-tap before you saw the footprints,

trailing from the dunes into the heart of the beach. How could you not follow them? The sand would speed away beneath you. The

only world that existed would be those small footprints breaking the sand, and leading you away from your perfect evening.

Leading you away with a *tap-tap-tap*.

Still you'd race. On and on. Further and further.

tap-tap-tap

Until...

Ifyou were there, you'd see a little fair-haired girl crouching

down on the sand, her red swimming costume dappled with sand. In her hand would be a small plastic spade, and upturned on the sand in front of her a red plastic bucket. As she crouched on the ground, by the moat she had dug in the crumbling sand, her hand would

drop down again. She would smile in innocent pleasure as the red spade hit the red bucket, once, twice, again.

tap-tap-tap

And once she had loosened the sand, she would pull away the

upturned bucket to reveal a perfect sandcastle, drying in the evening sun.

And you'd smile again and then off into the sky.

And you'd be a part of that perfect evening.

If you were there.

The girl in the red swimsuit stopped playing with sandcastles. She had built herself a whole fortress of them, connecting them

carefully with corridors of wet sand, and now she was bored. The seagulls still cawed overhead, and the sun was still slowly sliding into the sea. She decided to go find some excitement.

She cast her bucket and spade aside and can the length of the

beach, her feet leaving light footprints in the soft sand. She didn't tire and she didn't get out of breath, running with that boundless energy that only the young have. She didn't know where she was

running to, but something told her that further down the beach, just behind these rocks, there would be some excitement.

Something was right.

Lying half in the water, there was a glass coffin. The sunset set fire to it, red light glistening through the pale blue glass. She could see the body inside it, resting there like Snow White in her poisoned slumber. But Snow White was only a story, and people didn't

usually take their naps inside coffins. She felt a little quiver of fear.

As she moved closer, she started to tip-toe. Even the sound of her small feet resting onto the sand was too loud for her. She could see the woman in the coffin. She was short and bonny, with a mess of red curls tumbling around her head. Her eyes were closed, but she looked pretty. There was no sign of any apple in her mouth.

The woman's eyes opened, and she looked at the girl.

'Hello,' the woman said. Her voice came clearly through the

glass. There wasn't so much as a slight muffle to it. The girl cocked her head to one side, and the woman gave her a sleepy smile.

'Would you like to build a sandcastle?' the girl asked.

The Doctor stood at one side of the room, his umbrella's red handle tapping thoughtfully against his lips. He was frowning; sad grey eyes hooded in shadow. The couple arguing in the centre of the

room didn't pay him any attention, throwing their arms around and spitting their disagreements at each other. They were both dressed in identical dark camouflage fatigues, and both with the same close-cropped hair: there was no concession made to gender, despite one

being male and the other female.

‘We should kill him,’ the woman barked. ‘It’s no less than he

deserves.’

The man sucked air over his teeth but didn’t argue.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows.

‘He’s a killer,’ she spat. ‘It’s justice, pure and simple.’

‘Not revenge?’ the Doctor asked.

The man’s eyes rolled to the ceiling, but the woman spun to the

Doctor and nearly took his eye out with a finger. He could feel the flecks of spittle landing on his face as she shouted, but didn’t change his expression. His eyes met hers, but at the same time he was reading the badge on her shoulder: a black circle bordering

stark lettering. EZT, it read. European Zone Taskforce, it meant.

‘You keep your mouth shut,’ she warned him.

‘What you’re thinking would be a mistake,’ the Doctor said.

‘Don’t threaten us,’ the male soldier growled.

The Doctor spread his hands wide to show that he meant no

harm, his umbrella’s curved handle dropping into a jacket pocket. It was a neat trick, but he didn’t smile as he pulled it off: he wanted them to know just how serious he was.

‘I’m not,’ he promised them.

‘You’re not part of this team,’ the man continued. His hand

slipped to the holster across his hips meaningfully. ‘For all we know, you’re a mezzy spy.’

Mezzy was the soldiers’ slang for the MEZ – the Middle East

Zone. The World Zones had supposedly brought the whole planet

together in peace, but the Doctor found that the old animosities still ran strong. There was too much history for it to be any other way.

‘I just want to help,’ the Doctor said softly.

‘Help what?’

‘Keep you from committing murder,’ he answered gravely.

The two soldiers snorted at that, and gave each other a weary

look.

‘You Gaia freaks break me up,’ the man said with a shake of the

head. ‘OK, so we know they’re intelligent. But at the end of the day, it killed a man and it needs putting down. It’s just a dolphin.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ was all the Doctor would say.

Mel sat on the beach as the sun went down and marvelled at the

feeling of the sand conning through her fingers. She couldn’t get over it despite how impressive everything else was around her, that was what she kept coming back to. The simple sensation of the

grains of sand slipping through her fingers: it was amazing.

The girl in the swimsuit – Emily – sat in front of her, building sandcastles with an intensity that only the very dedicated and the very young could manage. She was beautiful: blonde hair and blue eyes. Mel couldn’t help but watch with a half-smile on her face as she wondered if her own children would be as beautiful and well-behaved.

She shook herself: there was plenty of time for that.

Emily looked up at her and smiled. Mel smiled back, and the little girl went back to her play. Plenty of time, she told herself, except of course that there wasn’t. She wished she could just lie back on the sand and enjoy the last few rays of the sun, and pretend for a few moments more that Emily was her daughter. But the Doctor had

sent her here for a reason, and there was no more ignoring it.

Looking over Emily’s head, Mel saw the dolphin.

‘Emily,’ Mel said softly. The little girl looked up. ‘What’s that?’

She pointed over the girl's head, and Emily turned and looked at the sea. The dolphin's grey flesh caught the evening sun as it lay on the shore, its eyes glassy and dead. It hadn't moved since Mel had arrived on the beach, and she had no doubts that it wouldn't move ever again. She had never seen a dead one in real life, only in the pictures that Greenpeace posted her every so often to convince her to stop eating tuna.

There was a flash of something in the girl's eyes.

'The sea, silly,' she said as she went back to her sandcastles.

Mel reached out and took her hand.

'No, Emily,' she said, soft but firm. 'There's something else. You can see it, can't you?'

Emily didn't look, keeping her head forcefully down. She

stubbornly patted the sand into the bucket, but she was sniffing as she did it. Mel could see the tears prickling the edges of the little girl's blue eyes: what kind of monster could upset a small child like this? Only her, only her. She put her hand gently under Emily's chin and lifted her face to look into her eyes.

'Don't be afraid,' she said, and pointed Emily's eyes to the sea.

The girl sniffed loudly.

'It's...' she said.

How could the Doctor ask her to do this?

'Emily?'

'It's Captain Montagu,' the little girl said.

'You'd better get the Easy-T,' Victoria said.

The young man with the glasses and the white lab coat went pale, and then turned and ran from the room. Victoria ran her hand

through her hair and turned back to the computer: it took up most of the room, even though it was packed with the most state-of-the-art nano-chips that the European Zone could afford. Lights flashed

angrily at her, and nothing she did could pacify them: she was locked out.

She'd built the damned computer, and she couldn't even begin to imagine how it had been done. Whoever was responsible, she either wanted to kill them, or hire them.

The door slid open and a little man with bad dress sense strolled casually in. He was followed pretty quickly by two of the Easy-T – Maddox and Brown – who did their best to make it look like they were in charge. Maddox had her rifle in her hands, which Victoria always thought made her look less threatening, not more: as if it just highlighted the fact that she hadn't wit enough to rely on, and so had to put her faith in weapons instead. Brown just glowered and looked over to the computer.

'What did he do?' the soldier asked.

'This is him?' Victoria barked.

The little man doffed his hat and smiled toothily.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm the Doctor.'

'What did he do?' Brown repeated.

Victoria just gave him a cold look: it was perfectly obvious to even a dullard like Brown what had been done. What mattered now was how it could be *un* done.

'Shut it down,' Maddox ordered.

'I can't!'

'I don't care about –'

'No, I can't!' Victoria snapped. 'He's done something to the controls. I can't even get her to respond to my authorisation code...

which isn't even possible, I should point out. The only way to shut it down would be to blow the power grid, but then you risk the

reactor going into meltdown and destroying the whole mainframe.'

The little man just smiled awkwardly again.

'How did you even do that?' Victoria asked him.

'Well,' he said, giving the computer a gentle pat, 'you programmed the computer to respond only to the commands of one person; it was relatively simple to convince it that I was that person.'

Victoria decided to ignore that.

'Well done,' Maddox said. 'Now *un* do it.'

Victoria just shook her head in exasperation.

'How much do you want?' she asked sharply. Anyone who had gone to all that trouble to make the computer inoperable and still stuck around obviously expected to gain something for his trouble.

'I'm authorised to sign off expenses of up to a million: after that, the EZ are going to get involved and that will just take so much longer.'

The little man raised an eyebrow at that and started to pace around the computer like a cat stalking an injured bird. He had an umbrella in his hand, which he couldn't seem to make up his mind whether to use as a walking stick or a baton. As he paced, though, Victoria could see that he was studying the computer very carefully.

'What does it do?' he asked eventually.

Maddox and Brown – like the startling intellects they were – looked at each other cautiously. They might as well have hung up a banner that said 'Big secret being kept here' and let off a couple of party-poppers. Victoria folded her arms across her chest and pretended that she hadn't noticed. Perhaps the little man would be kind and pretend he hadn't either.

‘It’s an auto-translation computer,’ she said coldly.

The little man smiled at that.

‘An auto-translation computer!’ he echoed, as if it was the most impressive thing he had ever heard. ‘Yes, I think I saw one of those in the duty free shop when we arrived. Except of course that only cost ten credits, and you offered me a million credits just to get this one working again. Your tax system must be extraordinary.’

Victoria’s face was set cold.

It’s a new design,’ she said flatly.

‘Yes, it is rather,’ the little man agreed. ‘I’ve never seen an auto-translation unit with a positronic matrix before. It’s so complex, it’s very nearly human.’

Victoria didn’t answer that. Clearly this little Doctor knew what he was talking about she started to run through the possibilities in her head – could the MEZ have anybody who was as advanced in

the field as she was? No, surely not: all modesty aside, if they did they wouldn’t need anything from her – they’d just build their own computer and make contact.

Maddox stepped forward and prodded the Doctor in the chest

with her rifle. He gave her a slightly disappointed look, as if she were a child who had thrown a tantrum after promising she was

going to be a good girl. Maddox didn’t seem to mind: she just

nodded over to the computer, and the small redheaded woman who

was currently hooked up to the mainframe.

‘Look,’ Maddox said. ‘Just tell us how to disconnect your friend from Emily. Or else.’

The little girl’s eyes were red-rimmed and raw but she wouldn’t let Mel comfort her. Instead, she sat on the beach with her knees pulled up to her chin and stared at the dead dolphin. She hadn’t said

anything as she’d cried, hadn’t even tried to wipe the tears away, and

all Mel could do was sit with her and wait. Her heart was

breaking with each salty tear that dripped unheeded onto the already wet sand.

‘Was he your friend?’ she asked softly.

Emily sniffed loudly, and nodded.

‘But he was Mummy and Daddy’s friend first,’ she said.

Mel wasn’t quite sure what to make of that. The Doctor had

warned her, before connecting her up to the computer, that what she found on the inside would seem very real, but that she shouldn’t take it at face value: it was just a construct of her mind, trying to make sense of the complicated landscape of the artificial mind she was immersed in. She had nodded and said she wouldn’t, and then

promptly forgotten about it as soon as she felt the sun on her face and the sand underfoot.

Sun and sand were one thing. But parents?

‘You’ve got a mummy and a daddy?’ Mel asked cautiously.

Emily nodded again.

‘You think I shouldn’t have,’ she said, matter-of-factly, ‘because I’m a computer. But I wasn’t always a computer: I was a little girl first, and I had parents. Then I died, and then I was a computer.’

There were times, travelling with the Doctor, when Mel felt that her little home in Pease Pottage felt impossibly far away. Every time they went even a few years into the future, Mel started to know how her gran felt when she asked how work was going. Even the

slightest mention of a megabyte modem would make Gran’s eyes

glaze over: how would she cope with a child who wasn’t really a

child, but had been once before she had died? The same way Mel

should: she leant over and hugged Emily.

Emily just sat stiffly, but smiled as Mel moved away.

‘Are you all right to tell me about Captain Montagu?’ Mel asked.

Emily nodded.

‘My parents wanted me to talk to him,’ she said. ‘It was hard. But 146

I did it. My parents were happy then. For a while.’

And Emily’s eyes came to rest on the dolphin again. Mel didn’t

speak.

The Doctor obviously didn’t answer quickly enough for Maddox’s

taste: the words were hardly out of her mouth when she grabbed him by the lapels and thrust him up against the wall. Her nose was

practically touching his as she sneered into his face. The Doctor just looked mildly startled, as if a close friend had served him chicken at a dinner party and he was trying to decide if it was polite to remind them he was a vegetarian.

‘Tell us,’ she snarled.

The Doctor just smiled politely.

‘I can’t,’ he answered apologetically. ‘You can’t. Emily won’t let my friend go until she’s good and ready.’

It occurred to Victoria to wonder whether the “she” in that sentence was the Doctor’s friend, or the computer. She opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted as the door behind her burst open.

Two more men in Easy-T fatigues were standing there: they ignored her and looked straight to Brown.

‘The fish is getting restless,’ one said.

Brown gave Maddox a look, and then both of them followed the

newcomers out of the room. Victoria felt more than a little relieved to have the soldiers out of her hair: perhaps now she might get some answers out of her little intruder, scientist to scientist. She turned to him, and saw him scurrying out of the room after the soldiers.

‘Hey!’ she called, but he was gone.

Muttering to herself, Victoria followed them. Out into the dark

corridor, all gunmetal grey and emergency lighting: no wonder Philip had programmed Emily's interface with a beach – anything to escape the grey monotony of this place. She saw the four soldiers yomping down the corridor, the Doctor scurrying behind them with one hand clamping his hat onto his head and he ran. Victoria hurried after them, to the aquarium. Before she went through the door, she could already hear the commotion: waves crashing and the high-pitched squeak of the dolphin's panic call. Entering the room, she saw the sea water in the dolphin's tank splashing about the room, and the designated guard standing back in a corner, blood pouring from a vicious bite on his arm. The guard looked up at Maddox, fear on his face.

'It just went mad!' he said.

Maddox ignored him.

'We've got to calm it down,' she snapped at Brown. 'It'll kill

itself.'

'And we can't have it hurting itself,' the Doctor interjected bitterly.

'Not before the execution.'

'Exactly,' Maddox growled.

'Get this civilian out of here,' Brown barked at the two spare

soldiers. But the Doctor was already moving, his hands spread wide as he made mad little clicking noises and caught the dolphin's

attention. As a communication technique, it had about as much

validity as seeing a cow in a field and saying 'moo!' – but for some reason, the dolphin seemed to take an interest. The splashing stopped as the dolphin bobbed in the water, eyeing the little man cautiously.

One of the soldiers stepped towards the Doctor, but Victoria held out a hand.

'Hold on,' she said. She had precisely no authority in the Easy-T

base, but by then everyone in the room could see that the Doctor was having an effect. He reached out slowly and stroked the dolphin's skull. When he withdrew his hand, he still had all of his fingers.

'Humans have never been good neighbours to the people you share

this planet with,' he said gently, as silence began to settle on the cramped room. 'But that has to change: a hundred years from now, a fleet of rogue Ice Warriors is going to attack. Without the dolphins'

piloting abilities Victoria's mouth hung open: for him to casually announce the project's top secret agenda... it had taken the EZ

decades to realise that highly intelligent mammals born in a low-gravity environment might be the ideal interceptor pilots to protect the Earth's solar system from alien aggressors. If they thought for a moment one of the other Zones might be working on the same

premise...

'You're investigating the dolphins' military uses?' she asked. The Doctor gave her a dark look.

'Uses?' he echoed distastefully. 'They won't do it because you

make them. They'll do it because this is their home.'

'Emily,' Mel said, softly.

The little girl didn't move, didn't take her eyes from the dolphin's corpse on the beach. The sun was still setting in the distance, as it had been for the last few hours, as it probably would be for as long as Mel stayed inside this strange computer-generated world. But Mel

wouldn't be fooled by it: there was something noticeably unreal about it all, and at the end of the day she just felt happier with the real thing.

'Emily,' Mel repeated, more forcefully. 'I know the dolphin didn't die.'

Again, Emily didn't move.

'I met him, before I came here,' Mel carried on, leaning in to check that the little girl – the computer – was listening to her. 'We – my friend and I – we're trying to help him. That's why I came here, to 148

talk to you. I know he did something terrible. I know that's why

you're trying to hide from it. But we need you to help us, because he's your friend.'

A tear dropped down the little girl's cheek and landed in the sand.

The dolphin's corpse disappeared from the shore, and suddenly the sea was lapping the sand unhindered. For a moment, that was all there was: just the gentle static hiss of the waves washing over the shale and back out again. Mel felt a slight chill in her bones.

'He was my father,' Emily said quietly.

'I'm sorry?'

'Captain Montagu,' Emily said, pointing out across the beach.

'Phillip. Kawili'Kai killed him.'

Mel looked back at the shore. There was a body floating there

again. A human body.

Alarms were ringing, and lights were flashing.

If she'd qualified in another discipline, Victoria could have written a paper about how psychologically revealing everyone's responses were: the soldiers, for example, all grabbed their weapons and looked to Brown for orders – even the one who was still bleeding from the dolphin's attack. The Doctor, of course, comforted the dolphin and cared for the helpless. Victoria went over to the readout that told her exactly what the computer was doing, and why it had made base

security so nervous.

'Emily's back up,' Victoria said.

'That's good,' Brown said. 'Yes?'

'She's downloading the vocabulary into the translator,' Victoria said gravely. 'I think the Doctor's redheaded friend is up and about and stealing our research.'

Brown swore loudly.

He shouldered his weapon and marched for the door, not even

pausing as he glanced at the three soldiers.

‘You two with me,’ he ordered. ‘Maddox, kill that dolphin.’

‘Yes sir,’ Maddox answered with a glint in her eye.

‘Wait!’ the Doctor said, stepping forward. ‘You can’t!’

‘Watch me,’ Maddox grinned.

‘It’s a murderer, Doctor,’ Victoria said him. The dolphin looked at her, almost angrily. ‘It killed Captain Montagu.’

‘It wasn’t murder,’ said an angry voice. ‘It was self-defence.’

They turned as one, the soldiers’ weapons coming up to aim at the source of the voice as a reflex. Standing in the doorway was the redhead, an angry look darkening her face. In her hand, she held the translation unit, loaded up with years of precious research. That little unit was worth more than every single life in that room, and Victoria
149

knew what had to be done.

‘Shoot her,’ she shouted.

But before the soldiers reacted, the girl had thrown the device. It tumbled gracefully through the air, end over end, until suddenly a hand reached up and caught it.

The hand was the Doctor’s.

He pressed the unit against the dolphin’s grey flesh.

Kawili’Kai cleared his throat.

The first words that a Cetacean spoke have never been recorded by history. Oh, the history books have a pretty little speech about shared heritage and friendship, but that was a much later work written to draw a veil over human embarrassment.

This is the real speech:

‘How can you do this and not die of shame?’ Kawili’Kai asked

angrily. ‘You brought me here to make my brothers, my sisters, all of us your slaves. For centuries, my people have come to you with

nothing but friendship and love. For centuries you have tricked us and

pulled us into your petty wars, turning us into killers. How can you do this and not die of shame, you pitiful creatures?

‘You brought us here to learn our language: not to better

understand us, not to join with us in our games and our pleasure, not to join together as the Children of Earth, but to kill yet again. To lock us into your metal ships and throw us into space to kill and die to protect you from risking yourselves. If it wasn’t for Emily, for my friend, I would never have known. I would have helped you send my people into the grave.

‘No more,’ Kawili’Kai said, his voice a hollow, electronic bark. ‘I have become a killer to save my people. So that they shall never have to, ever again. If it takes every day left to me, my people will know of the evil of humanity... and we will fight to save ourselves from it!

You must be stopped: all of you.’

And for a moment, the silence hung heavy in the air.

‘So,’ said Victoria. ‘It’s war, then.’

Brown cocked his weapon.

‘Stop!’ cried the Doctor.

He stepped between the dolphin and the soldiers: blocked their

weapons with his own body. If they decided, he wouldn’t last more than a second, and then they would still kill the dolphin.

The future of the human race depended on it.

‘There is another way,’ he implored.

* * *

150

Some years later, the Doctor and Mel were standing by the Thames, in the middle of a crowd all standing and looking up at the Houses of Parliament The river itself was muddy and dark, and Mel

couldn’t help but wonder if Greenpeace had been right and

everything was polluted beyond salvation now. The rain clouds

were still omnipresent in the London sky, but were they full to

bursting with acid rain, or had life carried on much as it always had? She could ask the Doctor of course, but she had other things she needed to say.

‘She was just a little girl,’ she said to him. ‘I mean she was a computer as well, I know that, but she was a little girl too. She just wanted to do the right thing, and it killed her father. No wonder she didn’t want anybody to have the translator: she was afraid of who else might get hurt.’

‘But you convinced her,’ the Doctor said absently.

‘Yes, I did,’ Mel agreed. ‘But I still don’t know if I should have.

All the things we’ve done to the dolphins: perhaps Kawili’Kai was right.’

The Doctor merely nodded.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, softly. ‘But at least now the two races can

come together and talk to each other. They’ve a chance to put all that history behind them, and talk. You gave them that, Mel: you should be proud.’ As one, the crowd turned as they heard the

clanking commotion behind them. The dirty waters of the Thames

bubbled and parted, and something started to rise. At first, it looked like it was nothing more than a robot: large metal legs pacing up out of the river, carrying a makeshift metal frame into the air. But as soon as the shock passed, there was no mistaking the sleek grey

shape of a dolphin cradled inside.

It walked out of the water and onto the land.

‘My fellow humans,’ said the Leader of the United Zones from

her podium in front of the ancient seat of EZ power. ‘May I present to you the first Cetacean Ambassador to the Human Race.’

The crowd began to applaud.

‘After all,’ the Doctor whispered into Mel’s ear, ‘you’d be

amazed what can happen.’

And he smiled broadly.

As the sun started to come up on the beach, Emily stretched and

yawned and gradually opened her eyes. She wiped the sand from

her face, but it wasn’t real sand even though she had been sleeping on a beach; it was sleep sand because she’d been asleep. But the sun was rising now, and it was a brand new day. Time to wake up.

There was a man there with her, standing on the beach and

looking down at her. He wasn’t like most men: he was green and

scaly, and his eyes were hidden under coloured lenses. Probably to keep the sun out of his eyes, like her father had worn his silly seagull sunglasses. The man held out his hand to her and Emily saw that it was just a giant green pincer; she wondered if he wanted her to hold it.

‘ *Schhlarr e-schalarr gren da*,’ he said to her.

Emily cocked her head.

‘Will you be my friend?’ she asked him.

And you would have smiled at that, if you’d been there.

Methuselah

George Mann

An adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Peri

And from the darkness he will emerge... bearing gifts of

enlightenment and contradiction...

Unknown Byzantine poet, tenth century AD

The blue box wheezed slowly into existence, materialising out of the ether like a miracle made real, or worse, like something

escaping from the very clutches of Hades itself. A young boy,

watching with wide eyes from the other side of the plaza, turned and fled at the sight of this ungodly apparition, his feet kicking up clouds of dust as he ran. His shouts of terror could be heard over the din of the nearby marketplace as he lost himself hurriedly in the crowd.

A moment later a door clicked open on the front of the blue box

and a figure emerged. He was dressed in a cream-coloured jumper

with red trim, a pair of striped trousers and a fawn-coloured blazer that came down to his knees. His hat perched awkwardly on one

side of his head like an afterthought. The stem of a green vegetable was pinned to one of his lapels.

The man turned round on the spot, examined his surroundings,

and smiled. ‘It worked!’ He jammed his hands in his trouser

pockets, pushing his blazer back behind his elbows. He looked

pleased with himself. Behind him, another figure was clambering

out of the strange vehicle. If the man seemed incongruous in the setting – somewhat out of place in the ancient plaza – then his

companion looked truly inappropriate; form-fitting silver shorts and a bright pink shirt tied in a knot at her waist, revealing a large expanse of her midriff. Her hair was a short, straight bob of brown hair, which framed her pretty face. It was clear from her complexion and look of unease that she was not a native to these parts.

‘Oh.’ She pinched her nose dramatically. ‘Doctor, you didn’t

warn me that the place would smell so bad!’

The man smiled, drawing the air down deep into his lungs.

‘You’ll soon get used to it, Peri.’ He adjusted his hat, casting his young-looking face in shadow. ‘Constantinople is a sight to behold;

one of the greatest cities of its time. Of all time, in fact, now you come to mention it.' He turned to his companion, his smile evident beneath the brim of his hat. 'Come on. Let's explore! Lots to see and do.' He turned and strode off in the direction of the

marketplace, drawn to the hubbub of voices, sounds and smells.

The girl, a look of frustrated resignation on her face, shrugged her shoulders and set off behind him, trying her very best to catch up.

The market was, in fact, a seemingly endless warren of stalls and tiny shops: a bazaar selling everything from exotic fabrics to

unusual fruit, from roasted pig ears to heady Arabian spices, from tattered scrolls to glittering religious icons. The place bustled with people, and for an ancient city had a metropolitan feel that wouldn't have seemed out of place in another era altogether, Peri thought.

She tried to take it all in her stride, but in truth was dazzled by the grandeur of the place, from the towers and spires that dominated the skyline to the street-level interplay between the traders and their busy, bartering customers. She tried to ignore the looks she received as she followed quickly behind the Doctor, feeling more than a little exposed. She consoled herself with the notion that her fashion sense was just a little bit ahead of this time period.

'Doctor. Where are we going?'

The Doctor seemed distracted, as if he were trying to remember

the way. He hesitated for a moment, and then suddenly seemed to

get his bearings. 'Ah-ha! This way, Peri, full steam ahead!'

They weaved their way through the crowd for a few minutes

before, abruptly, the Doctor turned down a side street and promptly disappeared from view. Shaking her head in exasperation, Peri

dashed after him, rounding the bend to find him standing at the

other end of the deserted street, his hands once more in his pockets, admiring the view. He turned to see Peri sidling up beside him.

'Look at that. Already over four hundred years old and still one of the greatest feats of engineering in your planet's history.'

Peri shielded her eyes from the midday sun and followed his

gaze. An enormous church dominated the horizon, its domed roof

glittering in the reflected light. Above it, the sky was a perfect, powdery blue. On the hillside, all around the immense structure, trees had formed a protective circle. It was a stark contrast to the grey stone walls and marble facades of the buildings they had

passed on their short walk through the city, and the tranquillity of the scene was deeply at odds with the scrum of the busy market

they had just left behind them. Peri frowned, her hand on her hip.

‘Don’t tell me. I know this one...’ She clicked her fingers, evidently pleased with herself. ‘Hagia something-or-other, the famous

Byzantine cathedral. But it looks different, somehow. Not at all like I remember from the history books back in high school.’ She

cocked her head to one side, as if in thought. ‘Remind me, what

period did you say this was, Doctor?’

The Doctor gave a dismissive shrug. He seemed lost in thought.

‘Oh, late tenth century, or thereabouts. In a few more years the Ottomans will overrun the city and turn the cathedral into a mosque.

Eventually it’ll end up as a museum. Until the Sarkovians blow up the dome and try to turn it into a power station in the late forty-first century, that is.’ He nodded at the building. ‘Pretty though, isn’t it?’

Peri was just about to ask him who the Sarkovians were when she

was distracted by the sound of shouting from somewhere close

behind her. She turned about quickly to see if she could find out what was going on.

An old man had stumbled into the street behind them, pursued by

a gang of youths. Dressed in simple grey robes and carrying a

wooden staff, Peri noticed he appeared to stoop slightly with age, and

probably malnourishment. His long white beard trailed all the way to his knees, and as far as she could see beneath the grime, his feet were bare and exposed to the elements. He pressed his back up against the side of a nearby house, labouring for breath, and tried to cover his face with the crook of his arm as the mob jeered him

angrily. Both Peri and the Doctor started towards the scene, ready to wade in and put an end to the apparent abuse, when the old man

suddenly dropped his staff, straightened his back and glared at the gathered crowd in defiance. Silence passed through the mob like an infectious ripple. The old man stroked his beard, calmly, his eyes flicking from one face to another, eyeing them intently. They waited for him to speak. As Peri drew closer she saw that the crowd was not, as she had at first thought, composed entirely of young men, but rather a cross-section of men, women and even children. Their faces seemed full of contempt for the old man. He hesitated, and then, just when it seemed the silence couldn't stretch any further, he began to speak. Peri noticed the Doctor had inched his way closer and was leaning in, obviously intrigued by what the stranger had to say.

'I have seen the future.' This immediately raised a commotion

from the crowd, but the old man waved them quiet as he continued.

'I have seen the future, and it is a wondrous thing indeed!' The Doctor glanced at Peri, his eyebrows raised sardonically. 'Great sailing ships plough the skies above the world and the human race has conquered the stars! They have tamed the red planet,

encountered creatures from other worlds, and fought great wars

with their enemies in flotillas of enormous starships. Machines of light will take men farther than any of you can even begin to

imagine, all the way to the end of the universe, and beyond! I have seen these things. I have been gifted with communications from the other end of time. Heed me well, people of Constantinople. I know what will become of you all!' At this the crowd resumed their

jeering and the old man stooped to reclaim his staff from the

ground, fending off projectiles of rotten fruit and vegetables that someone near the back of the crowd had searched out and begun

launching in his direction.

The Doctor looked over his shoulder at Peri. She shrugged,

unsure what to make of it all. The Doctor smiled, but there was a steely glint in his eye. ‘Get ready. We may have to run.’ He turned and pushed his way to the front of the crowd, manoeuvring through the press of people, one hand holding his hat firmly on his head. He grabbed the old man by the shoulders and turned to face the crowd, affecting a calm and steady tone. ‘Now, now. Time to move along.

Nothing to see here.’ He proffered his most charming smile. For a moment the otherwise steady stream of jeering and shouting

stopped once again, as if the hecklers in the audience were unsure how to react to this new stranger, dressed in a bizarre costume and helping an old charlatan to peddle his nonsense in the street. Then an over-ripe orange splattered on the wall beside the Doctor’s head, and the crowd surged forward, almost knocking hin) off his feet. He managed to maintain his balance and, putting himself bodily

between the old man and the mob, he tried to fend his way through the sea of protesters, who by this point were doing all they could to grab for the old man. Unsure what she could do to help, Peri tried in vain to cover their retreat by hurling pieces of broken and battered hula back into the crowd, reclaimed from the ground near her feet.

‘Come on Doctor, let’s get out of here!’

It seemed that no one in the crowd truly had the heart for a fight, however, as it didn’t take the Doctor long to break free from their grip and make a run for it, the aged prophet stumbling along beside him. Peri joined them as they dashed for cover, her heels clicking loudly on the flagstones as they ran. The shouting continued behind them for a while, as did the assault of rotten fruit, some of which rebounded off the Doctor’s back as he shepherded the old man

carefully out of range. They ducked around a corner and tried to lose themselves in the network of small alleyways and side streets that branched off the main thoroughfares through the city.

After a few minutes they were able to prop themselves up against a wall, gasping for breath The old man looked red in the face and 156

leaned heavily on his staff, wheezing noisily. The Doctor, on the other hand, looked positively exhilarated, as though he’d been out for a

brisk morning stroll and the exercise had left him feeling energised and ready for action. He beamed at Peri, who was bracing herself against the wall, her hands on her knees, as she fought for breath. 'Well, good job I didn't lose my hat.' He adjusted it slightly on his head, waiting for the old man to catch his breath 'Try to remind me to pick up another spare next time we're in the twentieth century.' Peri rolled her eyes.

The old man cleared his throat to get their attention.

'I don't know who you are, but I thank you for your intervention.

Both of you.' He glanced from the Doctor to Peri and back again.

'My name is Mephistus.' He broke down into a spasm of coughing

and spluttering, waving his hand at the two travellers to indicate that he hadn't finished what he was saying.

Peri went to his side. 'Are you okay?'

'I'll be fine in a moment,' he responded through gritted teeth. He tapped his staff on the floor as if trying to shake the coughing away, and then pulled himself upright, stoically. 'So, I was right!' His eyes gleamed in the light, bright as the sun itself. 'You're from the future, aren't you?' He coughed again, and Peri shot a worried look at the Doctor.

The Doctor placed a reassuring hand on the other man's arm. His

voice was low, serious. 'Yes, you were right. But now we have to get you home to rest. We can talk later.' He glanced around, then shrugged. 'Do you have any idea where we are?'

Mephistus nodded. 'We're not far from my home. If you can help

me to walk a little, I'll show you the way. I'm not as young as I used to be.' He favoured Peri with a toothy grin. It took every ounce of her being not to recoil at the sight of the blackened stumps and discoloured gums on display. Forcing herself to return his smile, she helped him to his feet and, putting his arm over her shoulder, set off in the direction he indicated, at a far steadier pace than their crazed dash through the streets just a few minutes before.

Mephistus's lodgings were little more than an outhouse appended to a larger, more substantial complex of buildings that housed the

family of a wine merchant Years ago, he told them, he had educated the eldest son of the merchant and now, cast out for his

proclamations and fast approaching death, he had fallen on the

merchant's pity and begged for his help securing lodgings in the city. The merchant had been kind enough to spare the crumbling

stone outbuilding for the old man to use as his own. As they settled him into his chair, it was easy for the Doctor and Peri to imagine 157

what would have become of the frail old man if the merchant had

not chosen to make him the recipient of his generosity.

Presently, Mephistus was sleeping whilst the Doctor and Peri

talked in hushed tones in the doorway of the dank, cold room.

'But Doctor, it's practically a *hovel*!' She waved her arm to indicate the state of the interior: a chair (with snoring incumbent), a reed mattress, a dirt floor, a small table, a pit for a fire, and a stack of parchments and books bound in wooden boards. The walls were

coated with a thick layer of soot and mould. There was an acrid

quality to the air: the stench of poverty.

The Doctor wrinkled his nose in acknowledgement. 'I can see

that, Peri. But it's not his fault he's fallen on hard times. And besides, I think it's absolutely essential that we talk to him further when he wakes up. He seems to know a lot more about the future

than he should, concepts that he couldn't possibly have come up

with alone.' He scratched his head absently as he talked.

'Oh, Doctor.' She sounded frustrated. 'It was just a bunch of old baloney. Same as that Nostradamus fellow, all possibly-this and

possibly-that. He might as well have been telling a fairy story for all the actual derail he mentioned.'

The Doctor looked whimsical. 'Ah, Nostradamus, yes. Lovely

chap. Quite mad. But there's something different going on here, and I

don't think it's got anything to do with aliens or exposure to a parasitic phage.'

Peri shook her head in exasperation. 'Parasitic phage...?'

'Yes, and I don't think Mephistus has been infected. He doesn't

have the same scarring around the ears for a start. I think he's telling the truth.'

The disbelief was evident on Peri's face. 'You mean you think

he's actually receiving messages from the future?'

'Yes. I can't explain it any other way.'

'Neither can I.' The Doctor and Peri turned as one to see

Mephistus propping himself up in his chair. His voice was gravelly and tired, full of weariness. Peri looked at the floor, embarrassed.

'It's all right, young one. You're not the first to accuse me of being a charlatan. How do you think I ended up here, hmm? I didn't choose this life. I was an educator, a teacher, back before the voices started.' He coughed again, heaving forward in his chair. The

Doctor moved to his side, crouching down before him, intent now

on hearing his story. 'Go on.'

'At first I thought I was going mad. I'd always abhorred the

lunatics that patrolled the streets of the city, proclaiming that the world was going to end. I'm an educated man. I deal in mathematics and philosophy. I have no time for idle prophesying and doomsday

cults.' He stopped to snatch a breath, and Peri found herself leaning against the doorjamb, listening intently despite her earlier

scepticism. 'When the voices started I was alone. It was late in the night and I had woken in my lodgings feeling dizzy and nauseous.

At first, I had the notion there was someone else in the room, and I panicked, thinking myself in danger. I leapt out of my cot and

stumbled, falling to the ground and striking my temple on a chair.

When I came to I had a sore head and my mind was full of star

charts and unfamiliar words. I guessed it might have been a feverish dream.'

The Doctor took his hat off his head and dropped it on the table beside Mephistus. Underneath, his blonde hair was floppy and

unkempt. 'I take it the voices returned, later that day?'

Mephistus nodded ruefully. 'Indeed they did. No sooner had I

finished transcribing everything I could remember, the voices

returned to me again, the same message played over and over in my head. It begins with a man's voice, asking for help. Then images blossom out of nowhere, complex mathematical charts, sequences of secret codes. I have tried to interpret them, to no avail.' He paused to regulate his breathing. 'Then, the man returns to tell me his story.' He sighed. 'I used to fight against it, claw at my head to try to banish the demons inside. Now 1 draw comfort from their familiarity. I'm not sure how I'd survive without them, after so long.' He looked the Doctor straight in the eye. 'I have seen how the future looks, Doctor. I have seen it in my own mind. Now you must help me to convince the world. I must be seeing these things for a reason! Perhaps you can make people listen!' The old man had grown more animated as he'd told his story.

The Doctor stood, brushing himself. He jabbed his hands in his

pockets. 'I'm sure you are hearing these things for a reason,

Mephistus, and we'll do everything we can to help, won't we Peri?'

He emphasised those last three words, casting Peri a quick look to ensure she wasn't about to argue with him. 'Now, you say you

transcribed all of this down somewhere?' He glanced around the

room, his eyes coming to rest on the stack of manuscripts in the corner by the makeshift bed.

Mephistus was already on his feet, energised by virtue of the fact he had found himself a willing ear. 'Yes, it's all in here, Doctor,' he reached over and reclaimed a book from the top of the pile,

'Everything is in there. All the proof you need.'

The Doctor turned the book over in his hands. It consisted of a

sheaf of parchment loosely bound together between two ancient

wooden boards. He allowed it to fall open in his hands, and then, having second thoughts, reached into the chest pocket of his blazer

and searched out his glasses. He balanced them studiously on the end of his nose before peering at the pages in front of him. They were covered in a scrawl of spidery Latin and bizarre geometric line

drawings, star charts and astrological symbols. He flicked through a handful of pages, rustling the paper as he carefully scanned through the barely legible print.

'Fascinating.' The Doctor looked up over the half-moons of his

spectacles.

Peri was watching Mephistus as he fished around in his pile of

papers. 'Doctor, could we have a moment outside?'

The Doctor frowned. 'What? Oh, I suppose...' He folded the book

shut for a moment and tucked it away under his arm. He followed Peri out into the light, squinting as his eyes tried to adjust to the glare.

'Doctor, aren't we just wasting our time? I think Mephistus may be half-mad, not to mention delusional, and we're meant to be here for a relaxing break! Sightseeing, you promised me. "Nothing but a quick sightseeing trip."' She kicked at the ground, sheepishly, her hands clutched tightly behind her back. The Doctor pushed his glasses

further up his nose.

'Peri. You know things are never that simple. Mephistus is half-

mad, but there's clearly a reason for it. Look at these.' He shifted round to stand beside her and brought the book out from under his arm. He opened it, turned a couple of pages, and beckoned her to lean in. She put her hand on his shoulder as she scanned the spread of pages he indicated.

'Oh...'

She didn't know what else to say. The pages were filled with

elaborate drawings, containing what looked like a star chart, a series of spatial coordinates, lines of binary, a sketch of a space vessel, schematics and wiring diagrams; things that Mephistus couldn't

possibly be aware of in this time period, at least without interference of some kind. Things, in Fact, that even Peri herself had no real concept of. Her voice was a whisper. 'What does it all mean?'

The Doctor folded the book away again. 'It means he's telling the truth. But this is no prophecy from the future.' He collected his glasses from where they were perched on his nose, waving them for emphasis. 'This is an SOS.' With that he dipped his head and

disappeared back into the gloom of Mephistus's doorway, leaving

Peri standing out in the sunshine, unsure what she was supposed to do next. After a moment had passed, still none the wiser, she followed the Doctor back into the unpleasant outbuilding that passed for

Mephistus's home.

* * *

160

'I've got it!' The Doctor leapt up from the chair, nearly knocking the table over and sending Mephistus into a fit of coughing and

spluttering. Peri, standing behind the old man, managed to steady him on his feet whilst they waited for the coughing fit to pass. The Doctor was beaming at them both, brandishing Mephistus's book in both

hands. 'They're using a Feynman radio!'

Mephistus had a dumbfounded expression written all over his face.

Peri put her hand on her hip and sighed. 'Okay, you'd better start from the beginning.'

The Doctor laid the book out on the table before them. 'Looking

through the book,' he glanced at the old man, 'I kept coming across one word, one word that repeats itself over and over again in these messages: *Methuselah*.'

The old man's face lit up in recognition.

'The guy from the Bible?' Peri shuffled out of the way for

Mephistus, who was inching closer to the Doctor, keen to hear more.

'Yes. But also the name of an experimental hyperspace vessel built by the Americans in the early part of the twenty second century. The first, in fact, to be designed and built by the human race.' The Doctor smiled, evidently pleased with his deduction. 'It was lost on its maiden voyage.'

'What happened?'

'When the hyperspace drive was initiated it misfired and the ship simply disappeared, never to rematerialise. It was thought lost, kicked to the end of the universe and never heard from again. The five crew members and their captain were all assumed dead. The families held ceremonies and the hyperdrive program was dropped for another

hundred years.' The Doctor looked excited, as if the best news were still to come.

'Go on.' Mephistus was enraptured by the Doctor's performance. It was clear he didn't understand half of what the Time Lord was

saying, but his face was a picture of sheer delight, vindicated, at last, after all this time.

'Now, it appears that the crew actually did survive, and lashed up some kind of primitive transmission device to send an SOS back in time. It's all in here,' he leafed through the pages of the book,

'Coordinates, map references, everything we need to find them.' He put a hand on the old man's shoulder. 'Somehow, you've become the receptacle for their distress call. You were right all along; the whispers in your head were real.' The Doctor was full of energy now, caught up in his own enthusiasm. He continued flicking through the book, looking for more clues.

Peri noticed that the old man had begun quietly weeping, his

shoulders shaking as he leaned heavily on his staff. She took him by

the hand and guided him to his makeshift cot. He lowered himself

slowly onto his bed of reeds, burying his face in his hands. Peri propped his staff beside him and returned anxiously to the Doctor.

'I think it's all been too much for him. It must be strange to hear you're right after so many years of people telling you you're wrong.'

She folded her arms over her chest. 'What do we do now?'

'We mount a rescue operation.' The Doctor seemed suddenly

serious. 'From what I can ascertain from Mephistus's ramblings, the rumours were right – the *Methuselah* really was kicked all the way to the end of time. If these coordinates and charts are right, they're facing oblivion at the heat-death of the universe.' He ran a hand through his hair.

'And you have the coordinates? Let's go then!'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You stay here with Mephistus. It's

clear he's developed some kind of psychic link with the transmission device. When I break that connection, I'm not sure what effect it may have.' He lowered his voice, taking Peri by the hand. 'You heard what he said – he's not sure how he could live without the voices. His grip on reality is tenuous as it is. You need to keep an eye on him whilst I'm gone, make sure he doesn't break down completely.'

Peri pulled a face, clearly unhappy with the suggestion. 'Is there no other way?'

The Doctor gave her a reproachful look. She caught hold of his arm as he moved to fetch his hat from the table. 'Don't abandon me here!

What if something happens?'

The Doctor made light of the sudden panic in her tone. 'I'll be back before you know it.' He popped his hat back on his head as he moved to the door, Mephistus's book tucked safely under his arm. 'Now, which way was the TARDIS?'

The *Methuselah* hung in the empty void like a piece of flotsam adrift on an ocean of night Buffeted by solar winds and constantly assaulted by the intense heat of the collapsing star it orbited, the vessel looked like nothing so much as a tiny insect buzzing ineffectually around a light bulb. The main section of the ship was composed of a thin

ribbon of steel, which hung on long cables between two drifting

nacelles, both of which glowed with a fierce electric blue as they fought against the constant pull of the star, and oblivion. All around it, in every direction, the stars had winked out as the universe had grown old and tired, leaving the crew with the notion that the ship had been smothered in a blanket of the purest black. Only the russet-coloured gas of a nearby nebula and the fierce, red glow of the dying star gave them any sense that they were still within the boundaries of the universe itself.

Onboard, the crew had already reconciled themselves to their

inevitable deaths. Pulled inexorably into the event horizon of the collapsing star, delayed only by the struggle of their failing engines, they knew it was only a matter of days, if not hours, before the ship and her entire contents were vaporised, reduced to steam, gas and carbon dust. Gallows humour had set in and, following an initial flurry of activity involving an attempt to slingshot themselves out of the star's gravity well and the rigging of an experimental

communications device to send an SOS, apathy had not been the

behind. The crew had taken to spending long hours gathered in the observation lounge, the heat shields and visual filters down, enabling them to look out at the empty universe and ponder what had become of their loved ones back on Earth, and what, if anything, awaited them beyond the event horizon of the imploding star.

It was into this scene that the TARDIS materialised, accompanied by the strange whooping, grinding sound that had the crew

scrambling for cover. Most were under the impression that the

Methuselah had finally started to break up under the intense pressure, peeling open like a tin can and spilling them out into the heart of the furnace that was raging down beneath them. When, instead, a police box appeared in the middle of the recreation area and a man in a cricket outfit stepped out, as one, the crew decided something far worse had occurred: that their proximity to the star and their exposure to the experimental engines had rendered them utterly insane.

The Doctor stepped into the room, surveyed the five people peering out from behind their acceleration chairs, and tipped his hat politely

in their direction. ‘Did somebody send an SOS?’

Peri was starting to feel nervous. After the Doctor had left and Mephistus had finally stopped weeping, he had apologised to her for his emotional outburst and then fallen into a deep sleep on his cot.

She’d been careful not to disturb him as she turned the chair around to face the bed and collapsed back into it herself, taking the opportunity to rest for a while. She’d found herself feeling sorry for the man; he’d given up his entire life in the pursuit of something he believed in, and now, finally, after years of living as an outcast and suffering dreadful abuse, he’d finally found himself proved right by a strange visitor from the future. She let him rest, hoping that it wouldn’t be long before the Doctor found his way back from the end of the universe.

It had not been long, however, before the old man had woken

screaming and now, as she watched him pacing the room angrily, she was undecided whether to attempt to tackle him or not. She’d

certainly started to rethink her position of empathy. He glowered at her as he clawed at the blackened walls, knocking his stack of papers

to the floor with a swift kick. Gone was the old, decrepit man she had seen before, curled up peacefully on his bunk, instead replaced by a foul-mouthed jerk who, for some reason, had decided to trash his own hovel whilst she was forced to cower across the other side of the room.

‘Mephistus. Come *on*. Aren’t you gonna tell me what’s wrong?’

She raised her voice in an effort to get through to him.

The prophet stopped for a moment, spinning around and

brandishing his staff in her direction. His eyes flashed with ire and despair. ‘The voices. The voices have stopped! You promised me the voices wouldn’t stop!’ He dropped his staff to the floor and returned to his original pursuit; using his broken, bloodied fingernails to score furrows in the mouldy fuzz that covered the walls. She could hear him whispering to himself, under his breath, ‘Doctor, Doctor, Doctor, *Doctor*...’

Peri willed the Doctor to return as quickly as possible. If it wasn’t

soon, she wasn't sure what he was going to find when he did.

Through the viewing port and the protection of the visual filter, the Doctor faced the raging surface of the star, watching it boil away angrily beneath him like a sea of red flame. He could feel the

Methuselah bucking as the nacelles struggled to keep it from falling into the amber glow. He turned to Captain Morrow, who was standing beside him on the bridge, her coveralls dirty from days of ingrained sweat and grime. 'Angry, isn't it?' He indicated the bubbling surface of the star.

'It's an angry universe, Doctor.'

The Time Lord seemed suddenly thoughtful. 'I suppose it is.'

The woman glanced behind her at the sound of footsteps clanging

on metal plates. A man appeared in the gangway behind them, leaning heavily on the hatch. 'All finished up, Captain.' He nodded at the Doctor, wiping perspiration from his eyes.

Captain Morrow allowed herself a smile. 'Thanks, Wilson. Go and

join the others in the Doctor's ship. We'll be with you in a moment.'

She glanced up at the Doctor for confirmation. He nodded his assent.

When the footsteps had died away again, the Doctor cleared his

throat. He didn't take his eyes from the fluctuating surface of the star far below them. 'This is not a failure, you know.'

Captain Morrow sighed. 'Doctor, we nearly died out here. The

hyperspace drive wasn't ready. We should never have tried it with people aboard. It was too early. Too much of a risk.'

The Doctor reached out to the ship's control console and picked up a small device he found there, turning it over in his hands. Its polished steel surface glinted in the waning light. 'That's what I love about 164

humans. You find it so hard to see how far you've come. Even here, at the very end of the universe, you're arguing about failure. This ship is a remarkable achievement. You've braved a new frontier for

humanity. That should be celebrated! You'll get it right, sooner or

later. And in the meantime, you'll learn from your mistakes. No one died, this time.' He fiddled with a transistor attached to the underside of the device in his hands. Captain Morrow was silent, her eyes

lingering on the darkness beyond the light of the dying star. 'Take this radio. Under intense pressure, your crew managed to fashion a device that let you send an SOS *back in time*, from spare components found aboard the ship. It's far from perfect, but it served its purpose well enough.' He placed the transmitter back on the control desk and

rested his hand on the woman's shoulder. Their eyes met. 'Come on.

Time to say goodbye.'

The Doctor led her away from the bridge and back towards the

TARDIS, which was waiting for them in the observation lounge.

'I still can't believe we can all fit inside that tiny box.'

'Yes, well. In my experience it's best not to place people in boxes at all, Captain Morrow.'

She smiled. 'Call me Jennifer.'

He nodded. 'Let's get you home, Jennifer.'

She stepped into the TARDIS, disappearing over the threshold into the console room. The Doctor moved to follow her then, on a second thought, turned and walked briskly back to the bridge, where he

picked up the makeshift radio transmitter and began fiddling with one of the controls.

'Mephistus, I really think it's best if you just try to breathe. Trust me, you'll feel a whole lot better for it.' Peri didn't even sound convincing to herself. For the last two hours she had watched as the old man had reduced himself to a state of near exhaustion, bashing himself off the walls and wearing his fingertips down to a bloody mess. Every time she'd tried to get near him, he'd lashed out, once even catching her in the face and sending her sprawling painfully to the floor. She'd bloodied her knee in the fall, and ever since she'd chosen to stay out of his way, hoping that eventually he'd run out of steam. The man was clearly deranged, and worse, the Doctor's fears had proved true –

with the transmissions ended, the lack of voices had tipped him over

the edge, and now he was teetering on the brink of total insanity. Peri didn't know what else she could do. She wrung her hands in

frustration, thinking about making a run for it before she really got hurt.

'Come *on* Doctor!'

At this Mephistus turned to her, suddenly still. She gazed back at 165

him, wide-eyed with panic. The look in his eyes was terrifying, full of intensity, brimming with smouldering, unchecked emotion. He was

only an old man, but his madness was violent and full of passion, and she felt threatened by the change that had come over him since the Doctor had left.

The prophet's head cocked to one side. Then, as if suddenly

instilled with great purpose, he ran to the pile of papers he had kicked to the ground earlier, grabbed a sheaf of loose leaves and cleared a space on the table with a sweep of his arm. He looked up at Peri from underneath his bushy brows. 'Quick! Bring me a quill. The voices have returned.'

Peri hesitated. She didn't know if this was a good development.

Wasn't the Doctor meant to be rescuing the crew of the *Methuselah*?

Why, then, should they suddenly start broadcasting their SOS again?

'Hurry! Before it's too late!' Shrugging her shoulders, and afraid of how he might react if she didn't comply with his wishes, she searched out a quill and a half-empty bottle of ink from under the table.

Mephistus set to work immediately, his spidery scrawl filling the pages like a web-work of fine arteries and veins. After the commotion of the last few hours, the soft scratching of Mephistus's quill against the parchment seemed unbearably quiet to Peri. She stood watching him from the other side of the room, unsure if his temperament was likely to change once again. His bloodied fingers shook as he tried to hold the quill steady in his ruined hands.

After a few minutes, the old prophet placed his quill down carefully beside his sheaf of papers and sat back to admire his work. A wry smile was written across his face. He looked up at Peri, all malice

gone from his expression. ‘It’s from the Doctor.’

‘What?’ Peri ran to his side, her eyes flicking over the scratchy writing on the parchment in front of him. ‘But I can’t read Latin!’

Mephistus spread the pages out before them both. ‘He says to be at peace now. My words and my writings have enabled him to save the lives of the people stranded in the future. My prophecy came true!’

He coughed, wretchedly, but soon regained his composure. ‘He’s onboard the vessel now, watching the end of the universe. He says it’s a sight to behold.’ The old man was smiling now, obviously calmed by the Doctor’s words. He leaned back in his chair. ‘He says to tell you he’ll see you soon.’

Peri rolled her eyes. *That* sounded just like the Doctor.

Still wary of the old man, and conscious of the fact that his mood could change at any moment, she made her way over to his reed

mattress and sat on the edge of it, waiting for the Doctor to return.

* * *

166

Peri leapt up at the sound of the familiar, groaning hee-haw from the street outside Mephistus’s hovel. She ran to the door, beaming at the sight of the TARDIS as it solidified in the cool night air, shimmering like a ghost of itself as it materialised. Behind her, Mephistus let out a startled gasp as he watched the door swing open and the Doctor step out onto the street.

Peri ran to his side. ‘Doctor!’

‘Hello, Peri.’ He smiled; a big, jovial grin. ‘Everything all right?’

Peri raised her eyebrows sarcastically. ‘I guess you could say that.’

Her eyes were shining in the low light The Doctor watched as

Mephistus emerged from the doorway, leaning heavily on his staff.

‘Doctor. I’m afraid I appear to have treated your young friend

rather badly in your absence.’ He twitched, nervously, as though

afraid of a reprisal. ‘When the voices stopped...’ He looked haunted, bereaved, even; as if someone close to him had died. He didn’t seem able to continue.

The Doctor glanced at Peri. ‘It’s over now, Mephistus. You were

right. Your prophecies helped me to save lives today. You should be very proud.’ He patted the old man warmly on the arm. ‘And besides, I brought you a present!’ The Doctor reached into his blazer pocket and produced a large transistor, taken from the radio transmitter onboard the Methuselah. He held it out to Mephistus. ‘Go on. Take it!’

The old man looked warily at the strange piece of technology from the future. ‘What is it?’

‘A paperweight. Use it to keep you writings safe.’ The Doctor

smiled.

‘Everything will be fine,’ said Peri.

The old man looked wary but he accepted the gift, slipping it safely into the pocket of his tattered grey robes. ‘Thank you, Doctor. For everything.’ He glanced sheepishly at Peri. ‘And you, young lady.

Thank you.’

Peri was just happy to have the Doctor back again. She smiled at Mephistus. ‘I hope things work out for you okay.’

The old man turned around and without saying another word

shuffled back into the dim interior of his makeshift home.

The Doctor turned to Peri. ‘Come on. Time for us to go.’

Smiling, she linked her arm through his and let him lead her back to the TARDIS.

Peri leaned on the hexagonal console with her elbows, watching the steady rise and fall of the time rotor. The Doctor danced around her, fiddling with the controls; pulling levers and twiddling knobs. Every few moments he stopped, looked at the monitor, and then started

again, cursing softly under his breath.

‘Doctor?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘Doctor!’

He looked up, his hair tangled in front of his eyes.

‘Will he be okay?’

‘Will who be okay?’ He resumed his ministrations on the console.

‘Mephistus, of course! It’s just… You didn’t see how he reacted when you stopped the transmissions. He went crazy, bouncing off the walls, scratching at the stone until his fingers bled. I didn’t know what to do…’ She paused, gathering her thoughts. ‘I just hope the silence doesn’t drive him over the edge.’

The Doctor stopped what he was doing and walked around the

console to stand beside her. ‘He’ll be fine. The transistor I gave him was a part of the radio the crew of the Methuselah had used to send their messages back in time. It should retain just enough of a psychic link with the old man to pacify him. With any luck, its presence will help to soothe his troubled mind.’

Peri stood back from the console, a look of relief evident on her face. ‘So that’ll be the end of his prophecies, then?’

‘I wouldn’t count on that.’ The Doctor looked circumspect. ‘Who

knows what else – or who else – he may pick up in the future. His brain is like a beacon, shining out there in the darkness. Someone else is bound to see it, somewhere along the line.’ He paused for a

moment, and then turned his attention back to the TARDIS controls once again. ‘Now, what about that sightseeing trip?’

Peri smiled. ‘Great! Where to next?’

‘How about the end of the universe?’

Peri narrowed her eyes. ‘What did you say?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘I left my hat on the bridge of the

Methuselah. Just a quick stop! It’s on the way, after all…’

‘ *Doctor… ’*

And from the darkness he will emerge like an ancient sun, bearing gifts of enlightenment and contradiction. He will fill our hearts with the light of other times, banish torment and suffering in his wake.

Then, as if borne on the very winds of the Gods, he will return to the darkness in his chariot of blue fire. There he will face darkness and the many souls of the damned.

Attributed to Mephistus, Byzantine poet, tenth century AD

168

Nettles

Kelly Hale

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

God says there is no risk but faith.

I sit in darkness weaving nettles. A long silence to salvation, not even my own.

My brothers sit on their naked bottoms, admire their forgers, wriggle their toes. ‘Hurry, hurry,’ they say, but do nothing to save themselves. The spell constrains me from speech, else I would say,

‘Then pick up the nettles and weave.’

It’s hard to be a swan, or so they tell me.

Oh, but flight. How I long for it! And the sound of my own voice.

And sleep.

The Six Swans

It was unreasonable to be angry at a xaxa tree for blooming, she knew, unreasonable to expect life to stop simply because she

wondered how she could go on. Nevertheless, Bazima deeply

resented the gaudy display of blossoms outside the clinic window.

‘When do I get the food vouchers?’ her patient asked. The sullen

expectation implied by the words was also plainly written on the girl's gaunt face. Bazima couldn't remember a name to match the

face. Once upon a time there were happy rituals associated with

weaving the code for the unborn. Now it was all about food

vouchers.

She took a breath. 'The front desk will send the authorisation to the distribution centre in Low High.'

'That's it? That's all I have to do?'

'That, and keep your appointments.'

Outside, a wind stirred the branches, casting light on the girl's face – just the right angle for Barium to see the colour of her eyes.

She wasn't able to hide her reaction.

'What?' Sullenness turned to panic in an instant. 'What's

wrong?'

In the girl's left eye, the iris was half purple and half brown – a 169

small mutation, one Barium had introduced into the population

some 16 years ago. This girl, this pregnant *child*, was the first generation born under the occupation. There must be thousands

now, reaching reproductive maturity –

Her mouth smiled professional kindly reassurance, 'Nothing for

you to worry about.' But even as she said it she could see something sly and accusatory had crept into the girl's default expression, her head tilted in cunning assessment, as if she knew full well the

dangerous game being played out in her young body and just who

was responsible for it. Bazima turned away, but the sight of the tree's blossoms smearing pollen onto the window had her turning

back again. Which proved fortuitous.

'TRAITOR!' The cry was punctuated with a rock through the

window. Safety glass flew and tumble-rolled across the room.

Bazima screamed – she heard herself do it – heart racing in fear, even though it wasn't the first time a clinic window had been

broken with a rock. The open accusation, however? That was new.

After a moment, she realised the girl's irritated huffs and puffs were from trying to extract herself from Bazima's grasp. She'd

apparently covered the girl with her own body, the reflexive

protectiveness of the old for the young. Pointless and foolish. But the girl's expression had lost that sly certainty and gained a guilty, if surly, defensiveness.

Wind whistled through the hole in the window, and Bazima

carefully uncurled her fists and the coil of anxiety in her gut. She spotted the rock and picked it up, a jagged thing amidst pebbles of glass scattered like the beads from a broken necklace. There was no note wrapped around the rock, nothing that could make sense of a world that hadn't made sense in years. She turned a cool gaze on her patient as she hefted the rock in her hand. 'Show up for the scheduled exams or they'll cut you off. You and the rest of your family.' The satisfaction she took in the girl's reaction was only a little distressing.

When the clinic finally shut its doors for the day, she called the lab to let them know she wouldn't be coming in that evening.

'Do you think that's wise?' Naxala asked. 'Considering?'

'Considering what?' Bazima snapped, daring her assistant to

reference something he shouldn't know anything about.

Naxala's sigh was one of exasperation verging on insolence. 'The comptroller, Lady Bazima. Due here tomorrow. Or had you

forgotten?'

She had. 'Tomorrow is tomorrow,' she said, and disconnected.

Despite the rock through the window and its implied threat, and

in spite of her irritation with the feckless season, she decided fresh

air was just the thing. She set off for Low High taking the long way round Poke Park (she wasn't a complete idiot) and detoured through Little Sawhen (where no one knew her by sight as they did in her own ward), skirting the Unchanging City where the guildhalls now served as headquarters for the Gati. Already ancient when the

mythological Chifflin King himself walked the world as a mortal

being, the Unchanging City was one of the last great wonders in the world, and a very popular tourist site before the occupation. Now it was a military complex, dedicated to the development of weapons, overseeing the mining of hexacryte – and the particular scientific specialities of Bazima's guild.

Few of the guilds had survived the occupation. Even the ones

they took an interest in for their own purposes had been shunted to smaller facilities early on. She'd only been to the Unchanging City maybe four or five times in the past 20 years, despite having

worked there nearly every day for the 20 years before. She'd long repressed any urge to walk those avenues again. Instead she found herself trudging the steep incline of High Street, which she hadn't done that often back when she was young and healthy. Even so, she didn't stop to catch her breath until she was at the crest of the hill where the beauty of the view would have taken it anyway. It was

exactly as beautiful as she remembered, so much so that the

crispness of the air, the quality of the light itself was almost unbearable.

Habriuz was a country generously blessed. Even the current

political climate couldn't alter that. A combination of latitude, atmospheric conditions, proximity to the Rim, the ocean, and many other subtle, complex factors made the view from the top of High Street in Adonia Parish unlike any other experience in the world.

Up here, against a bright violet sky streaked with pale vapour, the coned roofs of the guildhalls glinted copper in the sun. Chifflins wheeled about the spires, long necks and long wings stretched out, gliding and dipping and calling to their fellows out at sea. For a moment she felt that same awe, that sense of sublime wonder she

used to feel – a sensation followed immediately by sinking despair and

the pervasive sense of hopelessness that had become her constant companion of late.

She knew the reasons the Gati chose this place, her people. She knew why they were selectively breeding a population they appeared intent on working to death. Those reasons were not the ones everyone assumed – not genocide in the strictest sense. She knew because she'd been told. Back when she was a scholar, an artist, a scientist, a maker of beautiful objects and beautiful people.

Once upon a time the biggest thing the citizens of Habriuz had to 171 worry about was where to dine of an evening. And now they wondered if their children would get to eat at all.

She turned her back on the view and started walking down to Low High to meet her contact.

Sixteen years and the Doctor hadn't changed. Not even his clothes!

Bazima smoothed the front of her tattered jacket, inexpertly mended by hand, profoundly irritated by her own self-conscious embarrassment. His features made her ache. The same face, all guileless charm and compassion, with grave sincerity just under the surface, behind the eyes –as if he'd asked her to make him look however would work best to get her to trust him. She remembered commenting on the colour of his eyes the first time they'd met, with a boldness born of her guild specialty. 'Blue is a cultivated eccentricity,' she'd said, flirting carelessly over a glass of wine, 'usually only seen amongst the children of entertainment artists.'

He'd laughed but hadn't corrected her.

Ages ago. Lifetimes ago.

A whole generation ago.

He hadn't seen her yet. He was watching a match being broadcast on the screen mounted above the bar. West Rim versus CAP. Her son followed team sports. A ragged whoop went up from the assemblage as the team in purple and black scored. The two Gati soldiers in the corner gripped their weapons reflexively. The Doctor turned away from the screen, frowning.

He looked the same. She didn't. She could tell by the flash of shock on his face when he realised who she was. He recovered quickly, rising and moving towards her, all smiles and chatter as he pressed her hand and led her back to his table. She barely comprehended one word out of six that tumbled from his lips, though he kept punctuating the rambling with a squeeze of her hand. After a moment she remembered to squeeze back, the simple code that told him it was still going according to plan. They could now eat a meal together like old colleagues. He would pay for the meal. That's how it would go.

The smells from the kitchen made her queasy. Nevertheless, she ordered the richest things on the menu. The greasiest. The spiciest. The sweetest. Whatever was swimming in gravy or drowning in compote and cream. She had no idea what he ordered. He was still talking. She blinked. Realised there were drinks sat in front of them.

He reached across the table, took her hand again, pressing a different kind of data onto her – genuine concern. 'How are you?'

She straggled with the urge to fall into the comfort of his compassion. He'd be gone soon enough, and then what would she

have? She took a long draught of beer instead. ‘Look at me. How do you think?’ It wasn’t a question that needed an answer and she

didn’t give him a chance to try. She had more pressing concerns.

‘How much longer, Doctor?’

She watched the knob in his throat rise and fall, rise and fall. He was discomfited and he couldn’t hide it. She could have fixed that for him easily. There were males walking the world right now

whose cartilage had been recoded to a smaller size. It was the sort of routine alteration she’d done by the dozen when she was an

apprentice. He stopped swallowing. His gaze drifted to the young Gati soldiers then back to her again, a bland smile on his ace, all indications of nervousness gone. They could have been discussing any innocuous matter. ‘If you’re asking what I think you’re asking, this probably isn’t the best time or place.’

‘No, of course not. Was the liberation of my people ever a real

possibility or was that something you said to get me m work for

you?’

‘You’re not working for me, Bazima. We’re working together.

And again, we might want to save this discussion for later.’ The bland smile stayed fixed, showed only the slightest bit of strain as the barman set plates and dishes on the table. Her mouth watered instantly, but her stomach clenched and clenched. The barman

wiped his hands on his apron. ‘Happy eating for happier times,

friends.’

She was going to vomit. Teeth set in a grin she pushed the words between them. ‘Jon was arrested two nights ago.’

For a long moment the Doctor said nothing and she marked the

course of his thoughts by the expressions that flitted across his face

– vague distress, blankness, contrition, more distress.

Arrested? Well, that’s not good. Who is Joza again? Oh dear, she knows I

don't recall, oh wait, oh no, no, he's –

'My son,' she clarified. She stared at the plate heaped with deep-fried seababies and stabbed one. 'My son Joza. He was arrested.'

'I'm so sorry, Bazima. Have you been to the authorities? Do you

know what the charges are? Perhaps I can –'

'Conspiracy. Terrorism. Other things.' She touched the nugget to her tongue. Her spit sizzled and she fought a gag reflex. 'I can't remember.' Fried seababy dropped back onto the heap. She'd never be able to swallow it 'He doesn't want my help. He thinks I'm a

collaborator.' This last she whispered, looking up from more food than she'd seen in weeks, into a face artfully framed by waves of hair, into the cultivated eccentricity of his blue eyes, and the false advertising of his soulfully downturned mouth. 'And I am. I *am* –'

His chair scraped back across the floor, a harsh screech that

brought an involuntary shudder. 'You're nothing of the kind,' he said quietly. His arm was around her shoulder – the last thing she remembered for a while.

'Oh my goodness,' she laughed, partly in horror and partly in

fascinated delight. 'It's – it's like a little time bomb, isn't it?' She glanced at him, took another sip of wine, 'Just waiting for the right trigger.'

'Truer words were never spoken,' the handsome man said, eyeing

her over the rim of his glass as he took a swallow himself.

Attractive as he was, she found her gaze drawn to again to the

data on the screen. 'It's not exactly a virus though, is it?' She blinked on her magnifying lenses to have a closer look. 'Still, it appears a little too complex to be a jumper gene.'

'More like a hitcher with a chainsaw in a knapsack'

She let the curious reference fly over her head. She didn't

recognise the nucleotides. At all. Intriguing didn't begin to cover it.

She blinked off the magnification and returned to the pleasant

blurriness of inebriation. 'What organism did you find this in?'

'Not *what*. Who.'

'A person?' Bazima gulped then snorted dismissively. 'No, I

don't believe it. Some parasites reprogram host behaviour through manipulation of certain code sequences. A lot of my work is built on that model but this is – I mean this thing is packed with code, this is the entire genome of…' She squinted at the screen again,

'Something that's *not* a parasite'

'Yes. You discovered it yourself.'

'What? Me? When? Why would I design this kind of thing?'

'I'm not saying you designed it. I know you didn't design it.

This.'

A slightly chipped fingernail tapped the screen in front of her

nose. 'It's the little shadow blob you found in the junk DNA of a child in Adonia Parish a few years ago.'

'It can't be.' Even as she said it, she could almost feel the shift in the cosmos, a stutter in the planet's rotation beneath her feet, and it wasn't from the wine. Also, it was becoming increasingly obvious that this man hadn't invited her back to his room at the Chifflinelle Casino Hotel overlooking beautiful Chifflin Bay to become better acquainted with her bare flesh.

'It can, actually,' he said. 'An anomaly you've encountered how

many times since then?'

'I don't know it is an anomaly. Anyway, it's a rare enough

occurrence that it doesn't interfere with my art.'

'Or your business I imagine.'

He was one of *those* then. Probably resented mummy and daddy for indulging their eye-colour whims on him.

'Oh, imagine away,' she said, 'don't let me stop you.' She tossed back the rest of her wine and looked around for her wrap. 'I am a member of a *guild* after all.'

'Aren't you even a bit curious about why it's there?'

'Of course,' she said with an exasperated huff. 'But what I found was a *shadow* not a whopping great load of code,' she shot a glance at the screen, 'spooling out like –' *Like it's never going to stop*.

'That is a simulation, right?' 'A shadow is a marker, Lady Bazima.

It shows where a thing stands in relation to the light.'

She wrapped sleek flu and satin around her shoulders, and picked up her handbag, clutching it so tightly the glass beads dug into the flesh of her palm. 'I'm sure that's a statement layered with all sorts of significance, Doctor, but you should know that I gave the

problem of the shadow to one of my students as a project months

ago.'

'His name was Ky Tezi.'

Was? A horrible realisation began to coalesce. 'How do you know that?'

'Because the Gati have possession of his notes.'

The low-level paranoia that accompanied any mention of the Gati

these days threatened to burst into full bloom in her chest. How annoyed she'd been when Ky hadn't come back from holiday break,

and how disappointed and betrayed she'd felt when administration informed her that her brilliant and promising apprentice had

dropped out of the programme and gone home to Porveo for good.

None of his friends, no one he'd worked with had even suspected he was unhappy.

‘They know you discovered the shadow,’ the Doctor said. She

started.

‘The Gati? But why should they care? I’m a *fashion gengineer* not a preventionist. I weave codes for hair and eye colour sets for heaven’s sake –’

‘You’re also a teacher. You’ve engineered viruses, you’ve

pioneered specific techniques –’

‘But I’m a member of a *guild*. Trade secrets are protected and sanctioned by the law.’

‘That immunity is going to end very soon, Lady Bazima.’

Suddenly her knees liquefied. She clutched the back of a chair to keep from falling, though she desperately wanted to run fast and far and hide so deep the Gati would never know she’d ever existed at all. She’d heard the rumours. Read the news reports. But she never thought, never suspected –

Sweet godlings. She’d been flirting like an idiot all night with a member of the Gati’s secret police! A moan of terror rattled out of her.

‘I represent no government or military force, Lady Bazima,’ he

said, reading everything and then some from her body language.

‘I’m here on behalf of the entire universe. Which sounds terribly dramatic and, well, it is. The Gati military believe – and I’m afraid in this they are correct – that a massive invasion from, well, let’s call it another dimension, shall we? is being planned, is in progress even now. Invasion has been attempted before using more

conventional methods, but this, this could actually succeed with very little effort on the part of the aggressors. Unfortunately, the Gati military don’t grasp the concept of “entire universe” unless it means they own it. And now they seem to think they can, and all

because of a shadow found in the junk DNA of a child you

engineered.’

Her heart, she swore, was the loudest sound in the room. It should have drowned out the quiet insistence of his voice, and yet she

heard every word with excruciating clarity.

‘Are you saying I’m responsible?’

‘Oh, no! Well, not as such. The process created an opportunity.

But something already had to exist in order to take advantage of it!’

Pondering this seemed to fill the Doctor with a gleeful intensity, a state of being she recognised well. Swept up into the theoretical, soaring above the commonplace and the touchstones of everyday

existence, one could easily be perceived as uncaring or insensitive.

He clearly wasn’t, but people were never sure about her. ‘It is a kind of virus, though not one you’d recognise as such because it didn’t originate in this universe. What I haven’t figured out is how it managed to wriggle into this one. That’s a puzzler. But once here it hitched a ride on a convenient jumper gene and cleverly

instructed that gene to stay put while it hid in the shadows. Where it would probably stay hidden unless directed to come out from under the rock, unpack its bags and settle in like relatives you didn’t know you had until you’d won the lottery.’

She closed her eyes, tried to still her stress responses so that her mind could do what it did best. ‘What sort of baggage is it

carrying?’

‘A transmitter signalling the end of the universe as we know it.’

She raffled out a laugh. ‘The entire universe?’

‘Yep. It’s a pretty big concept I’ll admit.’

‘I take it it’s still under the figurative rock.’

‘For now. But as soon as an infected species is sufficiently…

primed, the signal goes out. Bam. End of everything.’

She could only imagine what she looked like at that moment,

unable to escape the trap of his unflinching, sober certainty. ‘Lady Bazima, I’m sorry, but –’

‘No,’ she whispered, dragging herself towards the door though

she knew it was the too late to escape what was coming. ‘Don’t tell me, please, I don’t want to know –’

‘The Gati are going to recruit you – unwillingly, I imagine,

forcefully if needs be. They think they can use what they’ve

uncovered to their advantage, conquer entire populations, and some day, entire worlds with little or no loss of life because the shadow virus has been shown to render certain individuals pliant and easy to subjugate. I’ve tried to convince them otherwise, believe me,

because the shadow virus is only the first step and they are

definitely not seeing the bigger picture. But the only one willing to listen has recently been assassinated. Things are going to advance rather quickly after this. And I’m very sorry, really so to terribly sorry for it, but soon, sooner than you suspect, you’re going to find yourself doing things you would never have considered doing ever.

And you’ll do them, because doing those things will be far better than the alternative.’

Later, when he’d shown her proof of his assertions, when they’d

become the more intimate than the baring of flesh could ever

achieve, intimate in the way of spies and saboteurs, they’d huddled in a garret, half blind from staring at thousands of codons. He’d taken her hands in his, squeezed so hard the joints popped.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘Listen to me now. Things are going to get bad

– for you, for your people. Worse than you could imagine were you the kind of person given to imagining horrible things. It’ll be bad for a long time, and I won’t –’ He cut himself off suddenly, looked at their joined hands before shaking his head wearily. ‘I can’t

always be here to help you. But you’re not alone in this. You’re never ever alone on this journey. Whatever else happens, trust in that. The

people of Habriuz will be free again some day. I promise you.'

Even then she understood he had no right to make such a

promise. She granted him the same gentle indulgence she gave her son when he made promises he wouldn't be able to keep. 'Sadly,

you're not the Chifflin King, Doctor.'

His brow wrinkled in confusion then he beamed. 'The Habriu

version of Superman. No, no, *that* I'm *not*. But, one thing I am absolutely sure of, Lady Bazima. You and I are going to save the universe.'

* * *

177

'The universe can go hang.'

'Hush. You're malnourished and dehydrated and probably

delirious.' 'I mean it. I don't care about the universe any more. It's too big and too the away and I'm –' She opened her eyes, and

turned her head a bit. She seemed to have an IV drip in her arm.

'Where am I?'

'On my ship.'

'I didn't know you had a ship.'

'I didn't tell you.'

'I see. Dare I hope you've come to take me away from all this?'

'Do you want to leave?'

'Gods, yes.' She remembered her son. 'No.' *Oh Joza*. 'Yes.'

Tears rolled down the sides of her face. She hadn't cried in a long time. She blamed the IV drip. 'He thinks I turned him in.'

He didn't ask who. 'I'm sure he doesn't.'

‘Then he will. Soon enough. They’ll find a way to convince him

of that. Everyone thinks I’m a collaborator anyway, so it’s not much of a stretch.’

‘Does it matter, when *you* know the truth?’

‘Of course it does!’ She palmed the tears from her face, angrily.

‘Do I even know the truth?’ He started to answer but she grabbed his hand, digging in with ragged nails. ‘Please, tell me it will be over soon. That we’ll be free or we’ll all be dead and I can just stop.

Tell me something, anything, that makes me not want to beat you to the ground and kick you till you bleed!’

He was strangely, *maddeningly*, unsurprised by her surge of fury.

She let go of his hand, turned away from him, curling up, trying to fold herself into herself.

‘I just can’t care any more, Doctor. I’m webbing toes and adding fingers, making birthmarks shaped like chifflins – as if I were

designing fads instead of witnessing genocide.’

‘It’s not the end for your people, Bazima. Not yet.’

‘And you know this for a fact do you? Because I can look out my

broken window and see it differently. I used to be bothered by the possibility that these mutations could be passed on to future

generations. I mean, we were always so careful when we cultivated mutations for clients, and now…’ She sucked in a ragged breath. ‘I don’t want my son to die thinking I betrayed him. Thinking I

betrayed our own kind!’

His roar of frustration seemed to come out of nowhere, stunned

her breathless. She cringed as something crashed to the floor, but kept her back to him. ‘Your own kind is not the only kind of kind in the universe, Bazima! Your people aren’t even the only kind of

people on your own damned planet.’ She clapped her hands over

her ears and balled herself up as small as she could, though his words still poked and punched at her. ‘Oh, and let’s not bother to mention the millions of species in your oceans, or the millions of worlds with oceans in this galaxy alone, or that in this universe there are oceans of galaxies – and all of it is going to turn inside out, and be remade into the image of another, altogether different,

universe, if we don’t prevent that here and now. I know the universe is a great big very *huge* concept for your little mind to grasp –’

She found herself facing him again. ‘Does that make me matter

less?’

He blinked at her, mouth hanging open. After a moment his wild-

eyed horror relaxed into a sort of chagrin.

‘No,’ he sighed, ‘no, of course not. You’re what makes it *matter*.

There are billions of you and each *you* matters. You personally may not give a damn about the universe at the moment, but I have to. It’s where I live. And I think all of the *yous* and the potential yous deserve the chance to live in it as well.’

‘I wish I could feel it the way you do, Doctor, but I can’t. My

mind isn’t as flexible as I thought it was. I’m tired. Or maybe I’m just old.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe…’ One finger tapped steadily against his front teeth for a moment, ‘just maybe what you need is to see the

universe for yourself.’ His blue eyes sparked and glittered with possibilities. ‘Yes! That’s just what we need, just what the Doctor ordered I think. A short guided tour of the neighbourhood, an

introduction to cultural diversity with peculiar, occasionally toxic atmospheres.’

She found herself following him down a corridor, and round and

round and over and through, trotting after the breadcrumbs of hope she heard in his voice.

‘Bazima? Bazima?’ Naxala’s hiss sounded brittle over the old

intercom – anxious and angry as usual, but with a sense of dire

immediacy that probably didn’t bode well.

It didn’t pass her notice that he’d neglected the honorific. ‘What is it?’

‘Lady Bazima! You must come out *now*.’ She thought she could hear something – pounding, muted shouts and cries buried under the static of a bad connection. Poor Naxala. There was a time she was certain he’d be the one to turn her in. Now she found it didn’t

matter which of her staff had made the call.

‘Can’t,’ she called back, ‘I’m in the middle of packing a virus

here.’ It was a pretty mutation, elegant and just a bit whimsical, reminded her of the old days when people actually came to her for
179

just such cellular whimsies. She hadn’t fully understood before, the purpose of small mutations the Doctor suggested she plant in

embryos carrying the shadow virus. They seemed to form no

discernible pattern, entirely random, and of course she realised now, that was the point

Over the years the applications of her craft had rendered a good percentage of the world’s population vulnerable to stresses and

pressures they were unlikely ever to experience thanks primarily to environmental science and technologies. But artificially impose

pressures to a population and the program in the shadow virus

opened like a poisonous blossom, the beginning of the end for the universe. The Gad would never see it that way, of course. The

beginning was just the beginning to them.

But she’d seen for herself that the beautiful view at the top of High Street in Adonis Parish in Habriuz on the Rim was only a drop in an ocean of wonder. And every drop held the potential for

everything else in the universe. Perhaps the mutations were already

working, keeping things lively, surprising, unanticipated. The

young people of Habriuz were certainly feisty, still throwing rocks through windows, and fomenting rebellions.

She was probably going to prison. She was too old and sick to

survive it. But maybe she would see Joza again. Perhaps the Doctor would learn of it and rescue them both. She hadn't seen the Doctor in eight years.

Naxala's diatribe was still going she realised, only now rendered into a nearly incomprehensible whisper, – other things! Perhaps

you'd care to join your staff out here where the comptroller and *several soldiers* are dismantling equipment and confiscating records and – HEY, hey stop it! That's not even –' Naxala's voice cut off with a cry, and she bit her lip, so as not to react, to keep her hand and eye steady. Another voice called to her.

'Director? Lady Bazima? You must come out now. You are

required to leave the lab immediately. I have a signed order.'

She tickled the gene-packed virus and sent it into the cell. 'There you go,' she whispered. 'Get on with your work then.' Some day

that cell would grow up to be wings, or, at least, the potential for wings.

God says there is no risk but faith. My voice and hands obey the will of God, but my mind is faithless with questions: If I fail, am I doomed to silence? If I succeed, will my people reject both words and will? No risk but faith? Faith is a feather. Only my fingers fly now, burning up the too short night.

180

Larkspur

Mark Stevens

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Benny

13 June 1982 – Bluff Cove, East Falkland

The blue box arrives with the wind, flickering into being on the rain-

lashed beach.

A young woman emerges, her short hair ruffled by the wind as

she briefly surveys her surroundings, then turns to examine the box.

Her hand reaches out to the thick layer of black moss that clings to its surface, scraping some aside to reveal the blistered blue

paintwork underneath.

She frowns. This isn't right.

Moments later, the traveller emerges. The short man turns to face the ocean, arms outstretched to embrace the vigorous sea breeze, almost losing his cream hat to the snapping wind. Suitably

refreshed, he turns and is momentarily startled when he notices the strange growth consuming his time machine. He steps closer to

examine the phenomenon, prodding the moss with the tip of his

umbrella.

This isn't right at all.

'There's more,' the woman says, looking out across the rocks,

sand and pebbles.

The traveller follows her gaze. Large slabs and pillars of cleanly cut stone, washed up and discarded on the beach.

{CLICK}

{CLICK}

{HISS}

'...OUR NEXT CALLER IS RAY. GOOD

EVENING, SIR. AND BEFORE WE BEGIN, ON

BEHALF OF ALL OUR LISTENERS, I WISH TO

EXTEND MY CONDOLENCES TO YOU ON

WHAT MUST BE A VERY DIFF...'

{BLEEP}

181

{HISS}

{CLICK}

6 November 1928 – Midhurst, Sussex

Memories of my first visit to Overly Grange are but a distant blur, although the state of apprehension I found myself in, as my driver pulled up at the foot of the gravel drive leading to its entrance, suggested it hadn't been an altogether pleasant experience.

According to the Voice, my final visit, two decades from now, will end in death and fire.

With a measured stride, I began the short walk towards the ornate iron gate that sealed off the occupants of Overly Grange from the outside world. I allowed myself some time to collect my thoughts, wondering how much had changed in the five years or so since my

previous visit. While my accountants had been most thorough,

preparing a detailed report of the sanatorium's record of spending, I remained keen to observe first-hand how my financial contributions had been put to use.

While the crisp November air carried a notable chill, thoughts of the unfortunate individuals I'd met on my previous visit were more immediately responsible for the involuntary shiver that ran down my spine. It had been nearly ten years since the war ended, but its effect on those who sacrificed a not inconsiderable degree of

freedom for their country could still be felt.

+ + *Most of the guests here are veterans of the Verdun trenches,* + +

said the Voice of the Obelisk. + + *Their shared encounter with the errant time machines and subsequent extraction to the Greater War Zone has been attributed to an experimental deleriant employed by the German forces.* + +

'I detect concern in your tone,' I said.

+ + *Something here is out of place. Be cautious.* + +

I rang the bell at the building's entrance. A small woman, whose stern countenance appeared at odds with her relatively youthful

complexion, answered the door and escorted me into a pleasantly

furnished reception area. She said little beyond a short but

courteous greeting, offering to relieve me of my hat and coat as she ushered me to a seat. 'Mr Clements will be with you shortly, sir,'

she said.

I availed myself of those few moments of free time to determine

the more obvious changes to the Grange. I could still recall the sickly pallor of yellow paint, much of which struggled to remain fixed to the walls, doing little to set one at ease. An ancient, rusted boiler in the basement had also resulted in unreliable lighting

conditions. At the very least, these discrepancies had been attended to, for the reception area now sported a pleasant – if somewhat busy

– wallpaper and the electric lighting no longer flickered, offering a luminance by which one could now read.

Before long, Mr John Clements, director of the Overly Grange

Sanatorium, tentatively peered around a doorway that evidently led into the deeper recesses of the building. 'Mr Larkspur!' he

exclaimed, stepping forward to offer a firm, animated handshake.

My old acquaintance had aged noticeably over the years – his

hair, thinner; his jowls, heavier. Perhaps a touch of darkness around the eyes. Nevertheless, his jovial spirit remained untainted by time, if his enthusiastic greeting were any measure. I must admit to being relieved that he'd elected to remain at the Grange. There were

concerns that he'd been considering a change of career, which

would have been most unfortunate given his reputation and

standing. Goodness knows I'd toured a good number of similar

facilities in recent years, seeking suitable beneficiaries to receive my donations, yet not a single one had impressed me more than the Grange. No other individual had displayed as much compassion and understanding for the war veterans in his care as Clements.

'I trust you're well, sir,' I said.

'Indeed I am, Mr Larkspur,' Clements replied. 'I hope you've

also remained in good health these last few years?'

'I haven't much cause for concern,' I said, choosing my words

carefully.

'The Voice?' he ventured, a little nervously.

'For reasons known only to itself, it's decided to remain in my

company.'

Clements appeared a little uncomfortable. 'I apologise, sir. That was rude of me. I didn't wish to imply –'

I dismissed his concern with a wave of my hand, hoping to

restore a lighter mood with a broad smile. 'We'll say no more about it,' I said. 'Now, before we get down to the tedious matter of

ledgers, domains and bank managers, I would be honoured if you'd offer me a brief tour of the building. I understand the renovations have been numerous.'

'Ah yes,' Clements said, eyes suddenly alight. 'I think you'll be particularly interested in the Larkspur Wing.'

Half an hour later, with the tour nearing its conclusion, it came as no surprise to find everything in order. A brief conversation with several nurses offered further reassurance that the recent changes were welcomed by staff, visitors and guests alike, with the

refurbished chapel proving to be one of the highlights. As the

Grange had initially been established for the exclusive treatment of

tuberculosis, some of the medical facilities had been lacking, but I was

pleased to see that this matter had also been addressed.

‘Naturally, I saved the best for last,’ said Clements, finally

introducing me to the newly constructed extension of the building that carried my name.

We toured the common area of the Larkspur Wing, where the

convalescents with milder shell-shock symptoms were free to come and go as they pleased, just as long as they adhered to the schedule of rehabilitation and medical care available to them. Deep within the latter part of the wing were the more secure dormitories – I hesitate en refer to them as cells – where it was necessary to keep the more unfortunate cases restrained, as much to protect others as themselves.

‘We’re not sure what to make of this one,’ Clements said, as we

arrived outside a locked door with the legend 21B fastened to it. He slid back a small grate in the centre of the door. ‘He’s been with us for several weeks now. He’s rather harmless, but any attempt to

integrate him with the other guests has only resulted in violence. He claims that he’s a soldier on active duty, currently serving in a regiment known as Two Para. Not one I’ve heard of before.’

+ + *Be careful,* + + the Voice advised. + + *Not only is this individual one of the numerous displaced we’ve encountered recently, but his tachyon variance field suggests his time stream is connected with your own* + +

I peered inside the dormitory. The guest appeared to be asleep on his bed. ‘It’s not uncommon for the traumatised to relive their

experiences on the battlefield,’ I said. What makes this gentleman’s affliction unique?’

‘The battle he fights inside his head is more than fifty years

away,’ Clements said, a little nervously.

Something deep within my subconscious stirred briefly, then was

still.

‘He claims to have arrived from the future – 1982, to be precise.’

{WHISTLE}

{BLEEP}

{CLICK}

‘... SAY AGAIN, OVER.’

{HISS}

‘... TO BELIEVE {SSSSSSHHK} MUST BE

USING SOME SORT OF CHEMICAL WEAPON

WITH HALLUCINOGENIC PROPERTIES.

SEVERAL PATROLS REPORTING THAT

THEY’RE TEN MILES OFF COURSE WITH NO

184

IDEA HOW THEY GOT THERE, OVER.’

{CLICK}

{CLICK}

{...}

13 June 1982 – Bluff Cove, East Falkland

The traveller walks amongst the discarded slabs and pillars. The young woman follows. There is a sadness about him as he stops to examine each one in turn. He traces his hand over the decayed,

calcified husks, like a healer trying to cure the sick, brushing aside the dry moss that choked the life out of them.

The woman remains silent, allowing him this moment to be alone

with his thoughts. She traces her own path across the pebbled

beach, stopping to examine only the slabs and pillars her companion has paused to inspect. Dead, black leaves crumble in her hand and are lost to the wind.

‘Were they all TARDISes?’ she asks, after a while.

‘Not quite, Bernice,’ the traveller replies. He turns away from the

husks, toward the sea, looking for answers beyond the horizon.

‘Something worse.’

She too turns from the decayed machines, looking inland. Thick,

craggy hills, not quite tall enough to be mountains, undulate into the distance. Somewhere out there, a red light blinks. A radio mast, perhaps.

‘We have company,’ the traveller says.

The woman turns round, scanning the edge of the coastline. A

small convoy of trucks hurtles toward them at great speed.

‘Military,’ the traveller says, reaching into his pocket for the ID

badges and security passes that will shortly be needed, his contempt all too apparent.

‘Well, there’s a surprise,’ says the woman.

‘There’s always a war to fight.’

{CLICK}

{HISS}

‘... METHUSELAH...’

{CLICK}

‘... ANYONE CAN HEAR US...’

{CRRK}

‘... HYPERDRIVE HAS FAILED...’

{CLICK}

‘... LOST. PLEASE...’

{HISS}

{CLICK}

10 Quintilis 4472 – Sink-Hole Rho 5, Northern Mass, Phaedra

The liftjet circled the perimeter of the sink-hole three times before slowly descending into its depths. Much to my disappointment, the twin suns, Minos and Pasiphaë, were both in ascension, requiring the vehicle's panoramic windscreens to be tinted to such an extent that I couldn't savour the view. The Voice sensed my frustration, electing to offer a brief commentary instead.

+ + *The sink-hole is almost a mile in diameter and some 32,000 feet deep, but far from a natural phenomenon. A scar in the landscape caused by a massive interstellar war that touched this world almost two decades ago. I must accept some portial responsibility for what occurred.* + +

'You don't have to keep explaining yourself,' I said, quietly,

hoping the other occupants of the liftjet wouldn't hear me. 'I

worked out the pattern of our travels a long time ago.'

+ + *With little warning*, + + the Voice continued, choosing to ignore me, + + *hundreds of colossal mining dropships, each one a small city in itself, descended to the planet's surface, seeking out strategic boring locations within the southern hemisphere. Most of these machines later retracted, hauling their cargo back into the depths of space, but a few of them malfunctioned, their respective crews eventually succumbing to hunger or asphyxiation. Over the years, a thriving industry has evolved around each machine, the sink-holes becoming a huge, vertical sprawl of shanty towns, commercial districts and dirty, crime-ridden industrial zones as mercenaries descended on the machines to plunder their riches.* + +

The liftjet had descended well below sea level, moving beyond

the glare of the suns. The windows untinted, revealing a blur of scaffolding, cranes and rigs clinging to the inside wall of the sink-hole. Multicarriage elevators occasionally raced past us. Smaller aircraft, most of them automated, buzzed around steel lattices,

occasionally matching our speed of descent, before flitting back to disappear within the dense array of architecture.

I wondered what Melissa would have made of all of this. Of

everything.

+ + *You're thinking about her again, aren't you?* + + asked the Voice.

Now it was my rum to do the ignoring.

The autopilot informed us we were now descending beyond the

jurisdiction of the law enforcers, vindicating my decision to hire the protection of the Watch, one of the sink-hole's more reputable

clans. There were dozens of such clans currently operating in the sink-hole, each one given free rein to explore the alien machine and salvage whatever technology they could find. Occasionally there

would be armed skirmishes, but each clan generally kept to

themselves. It was common for each clan to contract an

archaeological survey team to aid them in their scavenger hunt. The representatives of one team had invited me to join them for a

week's excavation, hoping to secure a donation from the Larkspur Corporation.

I tried to ignore the throbbing headache that had plagued me

since our arrival on Phaedra, concentrating instead on the view

outside the windscreen as the liftjet began to dock at an alcove. I caught something unusual, out of the corner of my eye, on one of the internal monitors. The view of the alcove briefly strobed,

replaced for a split second by the images of old-fashioned naval battleships engaged in combat. As I shifted my gaze to look at them directly, the view of the alcove quickly returned.

'Did you see that?' I asked no one in particular.

++ *It wasn't your imagination,* ++ said the Voice. ++ *I'm detecting small but significant dimensional intrusions within this temporality.*

This is becoming something of a habit for us. ++

We disembarked from the liftjet. I was quickly greeted by

Dayvan Wendrick, the Larkspur Corporation's weasel-like liaison

with the university overseeing the dig in this quadrant of the sink-

hole. Iwo heavily armed treasure hunters stood behind him.

‘I’m glad you were able to spare us some of your time, Mr

Larkspur,’ he said. He led me to a waiting elevator, apologising for the presence of a press droid that buzzed around my head like a

bloated bluebottle. As the elevator began to descend to the dig site, the press droid span round, blue lights gleaming. A voice that was neither male nor female, but impressively far from sounding

synthesised, began its round of questions.

‘The considerable wealth of the Larkspur Corporation is well

known. To what can we attribute the source of that wealth?’

‘It doesn’t beat around the bush, does it? I said to Wendrick, who looked decidedly uncomfortable and merely shook his head. I

addressed the droid directly. All of our fiscal reports are in the public domain.’

‘That’s as may be,’ the droid said, dipping to one side in a

manner that brought to mind the arching of an eyebrow. ‘But

because of several complicated loopholes, that particular domain is only accessible to the citizens of your home world.’

‘Indeed.’

‘A home world with a population of approximately 23,000

individuals, all of whom are in your employ.’

I chose to remain silent. It had a point, but it wasn’t one I was prepared to discuss at that particular moment.

‘Just one more question,’ the droid said, blue lights blinking

urgently as it sensed the elevator had almost reached its destination.

‘Following the occupation of the Falkland Islands, what measures were taken by your government to avoid a military conflict and seek a

peaceful resolution?'

Wendrick looked at me, understandably confused by the new line

of questioning. I wasn't entirely sure of things myself. My head continued to throb mercilessly. I reached out a hand to steady

myself.

The droid wasn't having an easy time of it either. It span

randomly on its three axes, almost as if it were out of control. 'F-F-F-F-Falk – internal error. Seeking nearest repair centre.' With that, the curious drone was the first to flit through the elevator doom as they opened on to the dig site.

++ *Another intrusion,* ++ the Voice explained.

I stepped outside, eager to get some fresh air. Convoys of trucks, most of them heavily armoured and bristling with weaponry,

weaved their way through huge mountains of earth, seeking asphalt roads that would carry them away from the excavation site and

away from the interior of the sink-hole. Armed treasure hunters

patrolled the site in small groups, keeping to the upper gantries and walkways. On the lower levels, huddles of mobile buildings; a

lopsided, temporary village where the archaeologists worked and

slept. A small jeep had already begun bouncing towards us, at

speed, from the direction of the village.

'Here comes the team leader now,' said Wendrick, stepping out

of the elevator to join me.

The vehicle screeched to a halt before us. A short-haired woman

in her mid thirties jumped down, hand already outstretched toward me.

'Mr Larkspur, I presume?' she said, her voice a giddy mixture of excitement and nerves. 'I really wanted to thank you in person for all that you've done for us.'

‘You’re welcome,’ I replied, shaking her hand. A brief, almost imperceptible jolt coursed up my arm. There was a momentary flicker of recognition in her eyes, startling me once again. I couldn’t put a name to her face, but I nevertheless knew I had met this woman before.

‘Allow me to introduce Professor Summerfield,’ Wendrick said. ‘She hasn’t been with us long but has proven a valuable asset to our team.’

‘This way, Mr Larkspur,’ the young woman said, gesturing towards her jeep. ‘We’ve got a lot to talk about.’

188

{CLICK}

{CLICK}

{BLEEP}

‘... WHEN A SPOKESPERSON FOR THE AMBULANCE SERVICE SAID THE CAR HAD DRIVEN DOWN AN EMBANKMENT AND THROUGH A FENCE. MELISSA HENDERSON, A COMMUNITY SCHOOL TEACHER WAS AIRLIFTED TO HOSPITAL BUT PRONOUNCED DEAD ON ARRIVAL. SHE WAS 32...’

{BLEEP}

{CLICK}

{CLICK}

13 June 1982 – Between Bluff Cove and Stanley, East Falkland

The traveller sits in the front passenger seat of the jeep, engaged in an animated conversation with the driver. The woman sits in the

back, helping one of the soldiers with a crossword puzzle.

'I don't understand it,' says the driver, nodding toward a white brick building on the side of the road. We've passed this building three times now, but we haven't deviated from this road by any

significant degree. It's like I'm going in circles, but in a straight line.'

The traveller turns to look over his shoulder.

'Same thing,' the woman says. 'A whole bunch of them have

experienced something similar. My friend here says the aircraft

from the *Illustrious* experienced a group displacement that they can't account for.'

'Here's hoping you UNIT lot can get to the bottom of this,

because – oh crap!'

The vehicle slams to a halt, almost veering off the road, sending its occupants jostling into one another.

'Not another one!'

Two soldiers disembark, draw their weapons and train them on

the obstruction on the road up ahead.

'What is it?' the woman asks, leaning forward between the front

seats to peer out the muddy windscreen.

'Once or twice, I can understand,' the driver says, indicating the individual being handcuffed and searched by the two soldiers. 'I've counted nearly a hundred of these jokers now.'

The soldiers drag their prisoner back into the jeep. The woman

moves over to make some room. He's dressed in military fatigues, but there's something rather old-fashioned about them.

‘Gde ia?’ the prisoner says. ‘Kto ty naroda?’

‘No sprechen ze Ruskie,’ one of the soldiers says. The others

laugh.

‘French, Russian, Italian, German,’ the driver says, foot jamming down on the accelerator, reaching for the radio. ‘It’s like the bloody Eurovision Song Contest round here.’

‘Na kamennyi obelisk.’

‘The stone obelisk,’ translates the traveller.

{CHK}

{CHK}

{CHK}

{HISS}

‘REPEAT: 55 DEGREES, 24 MINUTES SOUTH.

61 DEGREES, 32 MINUTES WEST.’

{CLICK}

‘FIRST EIGHT AWAY.’

‘IT TOOK THE BOW OFF!’

‘SECOND EIGHT AWAY.’

‘... THROUGH THE MAIN DECK.’

‘AGA BELGRANO LISTING TO PORT.

GOOD...’

{HISS}

{CHK}

{CHK}{CHK}

13 June 1982 – Stanley, East Falkland

Something is desperately wrong. The Obelisk is malfunctioning and I can no longer hear the Voice. Things wouldn't be so bad if I still had my short-term memory to rely on, but that's also fallen by the wayside. I'm not holding out much hope for my long-term memory

either. Then there's that cursed headache that continues to plague me, growing ever-more painful and increasingly resilient to

treatment with each trip. The last time I heard the Voice, it tried to warn me about something. I wish I could remember what.

I'm not so much concerned about the absence of the Voice as I

am the malfunctioning Obelisk. It's not unusual for the Voice to remain silent for protracted periods of time, but for the Obelisk to fall into a chaotic pattern of materialisation and dematerialisation is troubling. Until recently, the Obelisk has forged a deliberate path through time and space, backtracking through previously travelled thoroughfares in an attempt to atone for the damage it once

inflicted. The Voice has never satisfactorily explained the nature of the Obelisk, or the manner in which the two are associated. I

suspect they're one and the same. Sometimes it's easy to forget the Voice is not my own. I've grown so used to its presence, sharing my own internal thoughts, that I often wonder whether it's

something of my own creation. Maybe that's what it wants me to

think. Time will tell.

Time...

Time is broken, tangled and knotted beyond even the Obelisk's

ability to mend. It's breaking down, struggling to tear itself free from the corner of the universe we currently occupy. It keeps

bringing me back to the same time, the same place, although there are subtle variations with each subsequent visit. Not only that, but there's a familiarity I can't quite place, as if finally confronted with the inspiration behind a recurring dream. It's Earth, some time

during the late twentieth century. The Obelisk arrives on the

outskirts of a small but densely packed settlement, a sprawl

ofbuildings sheltering between low mountains and surrounded by a fierce, grey ocean. It's mining. Always raining. A calm tranquillity prevails. Until...

At first, you don't see it. Eventually, you'll catch the blinking red lights from the corner of your eye, drawing your attention to the radio mast that looms above the building, reaching out to the rolling clouds above. Try to look at it directly and it seems to disappear, although the little tell-tale dent it leaves behind, pressed into the fabric of reality, soon draws attention to itself. Once you work out how to look at it without looking, you will always see it.

Why is it trying so hard not to be seen?

+ + *Ms Summerfield's persistence appears to have paid off,* + + said the Voice, one of the last things I remember it saying to me. + + *This is where it all began, a long time ago.* + +

Then silence.

Then darkness.

Then pain.

The Obelisk stands on the outskirts of a settlement. I stand in the rain, noticing the thin layer of black moss growing on its surface for the first time. The stone is cold to the touch, its surface still. I remember a time when there was some warmth, a low but

perceptible hum of power, some sign of life.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

I see the radio tower, trying not be seen.

I walk through the town, my pace deliberate and measured. I have no idea where I'm going, which is fitting because I also don't have any idea where I've been. But with each step I take, fragments of memory begin to return. I quicken my pace, eager to reveal

everything that has remained hidden from me for so long. Every

building, every landmark holds an associated memory. There's the

school yard, where I span myself around way too fast during a

playground game and promptly fell flat on my face, chipping a

tooth. Then the United Free church, where I spent many a Sunday

learning about Noah and his ark – I still get nervous when it begins to rain even to this day. There's the Trough, the best pub in town.

The Fighting Pig will be playing tonight. That's where I met her.

We got engaged there too, six months later, then married not long after under the shadow of the Whalebone Arch.

Then the house where we lived.

It looks much like I remember, perhaps in need of a lick of paint and a bit of weed killer thrown around the front garden. My ability to maintain its upkeep fell by the wayside after Melissa's death. I reach up to knock on the door.

At first, I think no one's going to answer. I'm not sure who I'm expecting to see or what I'm going to say. Perhaps this was a stupid idea after all. The door opens and a familiar face appears.

'Ms Summerfield?' I ask, a little nonplussed.

'Yeah, sorry for the home invasion, but I figured you'd end up

here eventually.'

It takes me a moment or two to find more words. 'How long has

it been?'

'For you? About twenty years. Time travel does wonders for the

ageing process, doesn't it? For me, it's been a couple of days since the dig.'

'Extraordinary,' I say.

'Well,' Ms Summerfield says, 'now you're finally here and not

likely to be doing a runner any time soon, I'd like you to meet that friend of mine I once told you about. He's got something that

belongs to you.’

{CLICK}

{HISS}

{KSSSH}

‘... AND OUR FINAL QUESTION COMES FROM

MARGARET IN SEVENOAKS. SHE WOULD

LIKE TO ASK THE PANEL IF THEY HAVE ANY

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTROLLING A

RATHER AGGRESSIVE CREEPING IVY THAT’S

THREATENING HER AZALEAS. FRED, IF WE

COULD START WITH...’

{KSSSH}

{CLICK}

192

13 June 1982 – Stanley, East Falkland

The traveller and the young woman find a way into the radio tower.

‘There’s always a way to dampen a telepathic field,’ the traveller says, ‘regardless of how strong it is. Anything going to this much trouble to shield itself from casual observation is worthy of

investigation.’

‘Worthy of your investigation,’ the woman says. ‘I’ve survived

this long by adhering to the general understanding that curiosity killed the cat.’

‘Splendid chaps, all of them,’ the traveller says. ‘Andy Warhol

introduced me to them.’

‘Name-drop much?’

The traveller leads his companion deeper into the heart of the

building, pausing every few minutes to examine the layer of black moss at his feet. ‘Interesting,’ he says. ‘Have you noticed anything special about this extraterrestrial contaminant?’

‘I wouldn’t want to spread it on a slice of toast,’ the woman says.

‘Very droll.’

‘I try my best.’

‘No, Bernice – I’m thinking more along the lines of those objects we’ve encountered thus far that have fallen prey to this infestation.

The stone pillars…’

‘The TARDIS,’ the woman says. ‘And this building?’

The traveller rises to his feet, dusting his hands of the moss.

‘Broken time machines,’ he says. ‘Broken buildings. Roads that

never end, corridors that never begin, people and places where they shouldn’t be.’ He prods the air in front of him with the tip of his umbrella. ‘We need to have a word with the owner.’

{CLICK}

{CLICK}

{HISS}

‘… BROKEN INTO THE STUDIO AND ARE NOW

DEMANDING THAT I READ…’

‘YOU WILL READ THE ORDERS AND PLAY

THE ARGENTINE NATIONAL ANTHEM.’

‘I’, NOT READING ANYTHING OUT UNTIL YOU

TAKE THAT GUN OUT OF MY BACK.’

{HISS}

{…}

13 June 1982 – Stanley, East Falkland

It took several attempts to breach the entrance to the radio building.

193

A sense of repulsion that was almost physical, not unlike a powerful magnetic field, initially held us at bay. Whatever lurked inside was going to considerable trouble to ensure no one interfered with it. Ms Summerfield proved to be just as well versed in the technique of looking without looking as myself, offering a refined technique that involved thinking about pink golf balls. I found the idea amusing, but to my surprise it worked, the building growing ever more real and tangible as I held that unusual thought

'There's an intelligence at work that relies on telepathic

emissions,' Ms Summerfield explained, already putting a shoulder to a door that I wasn't sure existed. 'The more you're aware of its existence, the more your brain tries to convince you otherwise. It's all a matter of –'

With a loud crack and a thump, Ms Summerfield breached the

door. She tumbled into a small, rectangular portal of darkness that appeared in its place.

'– concentration,' came a voice from within. 'Ouch.'

A flash of white inside my head, then...

+ + cluster the problem making fun of silencing the silence, but now aren't we? + +

'I'm sorry?'

Silence.

'You coming, or what?' Ms Summerfield asked, head peering

round the door.

The building no longer made any attempt to hide itself from me. I cast my gaze upward, to the radio mast that loomed overhead, red light still pulsing away. Thick sheets of rusted, corrugated iron, sporadically arranged to hide compromising gaps in the roof's slate work lay twisted out of shape, pushed aside by huge fronds of black ivy that

had spilt onto the roof and wrapped themselves around the antenna. Ms Summerfield disappeared back inside the building and I followed.

{CLICK}

+ + FOAMING INTO SCREENS AGAIN + +

{HISS}

'... YOU NOTICED THE RADIO TOWER BEFORE?'

'LOCATION?'

'WE'RE ABOUT A MILE AWAY FROM STANLEY. IT JUST APPEARED...'

{HISS}

+ +MELTING AWAY THE ROOM CRASHED

194

UPWARDS INTO YOUR BONNET+ +

{CLICK}

13 June 1982 – Stanley, East Falkland

Ms Summerfield forged a path through the thick vegetation that

infested the building's interior, no doubt a vestige of its derelict state. The state of disrepair was evident wherever I looked - walls, floor and ceiling alike all caked in that moss, the malignant ivy wrapped around and draped upon every protruding object.

We picked our way through upturned filing cabinets, scuffing

discarded paperwork with our feet, until we eventually emerged

within a small clearing, the only area of the building free of clutter.

I felt a draught on my skin and immediately noticed a gaping hole in the ceiling, opening the building up to the elements. I could just about make out the radio mast above. The leaves and ivy grew

thickest here, as if trying to knit the hole closed – or escape through it. I noticed Ms Summerfield standing to one side, watching me

with interest, as if trying to gauge my response to all this turmoil.

'Bernice!' A voice in the darkness.

'Oops,' Ms Summerfield said, turning away from me as she

approached a large bank of radio equipment that dominated the

central area of the building. 'Nearly forgot about you.'

You took your time!' the voice said, a little annoyed.

'Sorry, Doctor,' Ms Summerfield said, grabbing a large handful

of vines before standing back to give them a good tug. 'Things got a little bit topsy-turvy out there. How long have I been gone?'

A short little man in a linen suit appeared to have become inextricably tangled up in the dense mess of vines. He sat on a chair, which had also become tangled up with him, in front of a moss-covered control panel. ‘About an hour, by my reckoning,’ he said, swatting leaves and tendrils away with an umbrella.

‘My reckoning begs to differ. It felt closer to three months.’

‘How fascinating,’ the Doctor said, using a crumpled hat to brush dried leaves and dirt from his suit, his facade of disgust and frustration replaced with genuine interest. ‘Not only is it distorting space, but tying time up in knots too.’

‘I even had time to do a spot of digging while I was waiting for this one to turn up.’ Ms Summerfield was pointing at me. I felt an introduction was in order.

‘Mr Larkspur,’ I said, offering my hand.

‘An interesting choice of name,’ the Doctor said with a smile, returning my handshake and doffing his hat. ‘I hope Bernice didn’t stress you unduly, following you around time and space like that.’

‘I must admit to being somewhat curious about her constant presence,’ I said.

Before Bernice could reply, something heavy slammed to the floor in the darkness behind me. A whispering, chattering sound filled the air as the black ivy appeared to grow at an accelerated rate. Tendrils reached out from the gloom, prodding and probing at the scattered junk, as if looking for something.

The Doctor backed away from the console, carefully reclaiming his umbrella from one of the more inquisitive tendrils. He clambered onto a table to avoid the wiry vines that now snaked

across the floor, indicating that we should do the same.

The ceiling's rafters chose that moment to partially give way,

unable to support the mass of foliage above, pulling brickwork and sheets of corrugated iron down with them. A shivering mass of

vines and ivy burst through the ruptured hole, cascading around us.

'You'll be wanting your TARDIS back, I presume?' the Doctor

said, using his umbrella to fence off the advancing vines.

'I'm sorry, my what?' I asked, ducking as a thick trunk swung by, not sure what he was referring to.

'He calls it an obelisk,' Ms Summerfield's voice piped up in the background. 'Like the fat bloke in that old French cartoon.'

'Yes, thank you Bernice,' the Doctor said, rolling his eyes. 'You see, Mr Larkspur, your TARDIS – your obelisk – is a very sensitive piece of technology, far more advanced than anything known to the scientists of your time.'

A deep, resonant boom set my vision ajar. The walls of the

building shook.

'I can't recall the time I first discovered it,' I said. 'Or when it discovered me. I don't think much about that past now because it's all so long ago, so out of reach.'

The Doctor reached out to the console with the tip of his

umbrella, hoping to access some of the controls, but a vine whipped out of the larger mass with alarming speed, swatting it away. 'It's no use,' the Doctor said. 'It won't let me get close enough to the control panel.'

Ms Summerfield slowly climbed down from her table and

attempted a stealthier approach at the equipment, but she too found herself having to make a swift retreat as the mass turned its

attention towards her.

'How curious,' the Doctor said. 'Have you noticed, Mr Larkspur,

that our alien friend has shown a considerable interest in me and Bernice these past few minutes, yet it hasn't once made any attempt to test your resolve.'

The Doctor was right. Both he and Ms Summerfield were

surrounded by the vines and ivy, black leaves and clumps of moss shedding all around them. Until now, the mass of vegetation had

shown no particular interest in me.

'Let me try,' I said, gingerly stepping down from the table to

approach the console.

'Be careful,' the Doctor said, voice lowered almost to a whisper.

The tendrils continued to probe the air around the Doctor and Ms Summerfield, but failed to make any movement in my direction. If anything, they appeared to shy away from my presence. I watched

them for a minute or so, then judged it was safe to turn my full attention to the console before me. It was caked in dirt and leaves.

'It could do with a bit of a clean,' the Doctor said. 'Adrift in time and space for so long, it was only a matter of time before someone discovered it. Or some *thing*.'

Driven by an overwhelming curiosity, I removed some of the

grime, revealing a scratched plaque of black metal fixed to its

surface that bore a Morse code legend in white print. Below that, another plaque, this one with a logo showing a man hitting a gong. I traced the contours of the letters beside it with a finger, only just then realising that my hand was trembling.

'Larkspur RT-316,' I said, reading the letters out loud. 'Rank

Precision Industries. Ware, Herts, UK.'

'Impressive,' the Doctor said. 'At least by Earth standards. More commonly found housed in the jeeps and tanks used by the British Army, but someone with time, patience and a great affection for

old-fashioned radio equipment managed to outfit this building with as much of it as they were able to collect. All in perfect working order too.'

' *Were* in perfect working order,' Ms Summerfield said. 'How are

– heygerroff!' A large, rope-like vine had wrapped itself around her chest. She yelped as it lifted her off her feet, holding her still in the air as if a little unsure what to do with its new toy. 'Doctor!'

I leaned forward, trying to make sense of the controls before me.

'Let me tell you about your obelisk, Mr Larkspur,' the Doctor said.

'I'd appreciate it if you'd make this quick!' Ms Summerfield said.

'It's something that was stolen from my people a long time ago.

Not just your obelisk, but thousands like it, snatched up by a

malevolent alien force. Not content with merely gathering the

necessary pawns for their battles from their own time, they sought to plunder the whole universe and needed sophisticated technology to do so.'

'There was a voice,' I said. 'The Obelisk itself, I assume. It

would hint at such things. I never understood much of what it said.'

'Fortunately,' the Doctor continued, 'that alien force no longer 197

inhabits this universe. But they left their stolen technology behind, discarded and disused. For the most part these machines have lain dormant and idle. Others have continued to obey their

reconditioning, jumping through time and space, seeking out areas of conflict. Much like yours, which is how it ended up here on

Earth. On the Falkland Islands, to be precise. It found the conflict it had been conditioned to seek, but began to malfunction, trying to claw its way into other times, other spaces, not sure how to free itself of the infestation.'

'Doctor!' Ms Summerfield cried. 'I think it's starting to strangle me.'

Subconsciously, I pressed a few buttons and turned a couple of

dials on the console. A light blinked, a dull hum of power emanated from somewhere within the mechanism.

‘At some point during its travels, your time machine encountered the moss, an aggressive strain of alien bacteria,’ the Doctor said. ‘Its defences weakened by countless centuries of abuse, it couldn’t fight off the infection. The bacteria multiplied, spreading throughout its interior, manifesting itself as the black moss we see around us.

Normally it would be quite harmless, but it’s interacted with the TARDIS in such a way that it now appears to be self-aware,

stopping at nothing to ensure its continued survival.’

‘I’d very much like to continue surviving,’ Ms Summerfield said

between gasps for air. ‘If someone’s going to do anything, please do it now.’

I leaned closer still, growing ever more confident in my ability to find the sequence of buttons I needed to press, when to turn the dials, how to respond to the readouts that were flickering to life in front of me. There were two pieces of technology at work here – the old and the new meshed together – forcing me to dig deeper into my subconscious, trying to remember how the Voice once told me how

to set the controls in the Obelisk, trying to remember how to tune the Larkspur with such precision that the entire electromagnetic spectrum would be mine to explore. The humming sound grew

louder, deeper, as more and more Larkspur modules sprang to life, encouraging the underlying Obelisk’s own technology to power up

too.

The black moss began to withdraw. Slowly, at first, then

shrinking rapidly, overwhelmed by the waking time machine. The

vines seeking to cut off Ms Summerfield’s air supply quickly

calcified, turning to dust, releasing her to the ground as their molecular structure began to disintegrate. Above, other vines and tendrils of ivy attempted to retreat, withdrawing through the gaping hole in the ceiling, but they only made it so far before they too 198

withered and died, their remains stirred by the wind.

The Doctor rushed to Ms Summerfield's side, helping her to her

feet, dusting her down with the aid of a handkerchief he produced from his sleeve. Satisfied that his companion was unharmed, he

turned back to me.

'It looks like you've found what you're looking for,' he said.

'Just as your TARDIS did, countless centuries ago, when it felt

compelled to materialise here, sensing the impending military

conflict about to consume the islands. It attempted to blend in with its surroundings, oblivious to the presence of the lone amateur radio enthusiast burning the midnight oil within. With its energy reserves dwindling, it reached out into the depths of time, warping and

fracturing space around it as it sent out its final cry for help.'

'I used to keep log books of all the transmissions I received,' I said, trying to make sense of the flood of memories that now

overwhelmed me. 'At first, they all made sense. But then I began to log numerous contradictions. Things that never happened or might yet happen. Sometimes, the war never happened. Sometimes, she

didn't die. I kept trying to find her, listening out for her voice, but...'

'Unfortunately, there are some things that time can't heal, no

matter how much of it you have.'

'Do I keep looking?' I asked. 'Will I ever see her again?'

The Doctor briefly surveyed his surroundings, ensuring that the

alien infestation had been fully vanquished. 'You can try,' he said.

'But trust me – even if you do find her, things will never be as they once were. They call it the past for a reason. Some things are best left there.'

I flicked switches, twiddled knobs and threw levers into place.

More lights blinked, that hum of power growing ever louder as my confidence returned. Like riding a bicycle, really.

‘It seems to be responding well to him,’ Ms Summerfield said.

‘The Larkspur system became so intertwined with the circuitry of his TARDIS, only one person would have been able to make sense

of it all,’ the Doctor said. ‘We’re lucky you were able to find him, Bernice. It certainly didn’t want me or any other Time Lord

interfering with it. Understandable, given its previous owner.’

‘Who was that, then?’ Ms Summerfield asked.

The Doctor shook his head to change the subject. ‘Now, Mr

Larkspur, if you would be so kind. The dimensional instability

brought about by the infestation won’t hold out for much longer and I don’t really want to sort out the mess that’s going cause.’

‘What do I do?’ I asked.

‘Whatever you feel is right – it’s your machine now. Once you

use the radio system’s residual energy to help persuade it to

dematerialise, it should be able to finally rid itself of the

infestation.’

‘And then what?’

‘And then, Mr Larkspur, you’re on your own. Although I’d keep

an eye out for your younger self. He’s out there somewhere and

probably very confused.’

I watched the Doctor and Ms Summerfield retreat to a safe

distance before I reached out to press a switch that I somehow knew would begin the dematerialisation procedure.

+ + W-w-who are you? + +

I’d almost given up hope of hearing that voice again. It sounded a little unsteady and unsure of itself, but quite familiar.

‘A friend,’ I said.

I pressed the switch.

200

See No Evil

Steve Lyons

An adventure of the Sixth Doctor, with Peri

‘Cover yourself up, you brazen hyacinth!’

This time, there was no doubting it. The old man’s invective had been aimed at her. Nor was it the first time she had been likened to a flower.

‘Young woman! Young woman! Yes, I’m talking to you. In the short trousers and the pink... well, I hardly think that qualifies as a shirt, now does it?’

Why hadn’t the Doctor warned her? Why hadn’t she looked for

herself, paid more attention to this new world around her instead of just stomping off, brooding over the latest dumb row? Then maybe she’d have seen it coming, noticed that the fashions here were

conservative, positively Victorian.

Alone in a teeming rnarketplace, drawing the glares and tuts of

buttoned-up men and bustled women from all quarters, Peri Brown

had never felt quite so exposed.

‘It isn’t clever, you know, flaunting your rude bits. No one’s impressed. Are you listening to me? Young woman!’

This new voice was female, clipped, underpinned by a static

buzz. Turning, Peri found its source. A speaker grille was punched into a thin, steel pillar. Above this, a camera was mounted on a head-high pivot. Fined by its blank stare, she worked her mouth but no words came out. She settled for an apologetic shrug, and

wrapped her arms about her chest as she fled.

Someone intercepted her: a stocky man with ginger stubble and

the apron of a stallholder, drawing her aside with a knowing wink.

‘You’re clearly a broadminded lady. If you want something a bit, you know, saucy, old Rondo can find it for you.’

‘I… No. I just… Do you have, like, a coat or something?’ It was a hopeless request. ‘Old Rondo’ appeared to sell mainly computer

supplies.

‘I got a potato back here, the exact same shape as a you-know-

what. Well, as near as they’ll let you see – but it’s pretty blooming 201

good, I can tell you.’

‘Shameless!’ a woman trilled.

Another voice breathed, close to Peri’s ear, ‘Great pair of

tulips…’

It was almost a relief when the screaming started.

A man barged, in panic, through indignant browsers, a fresh gash dripping blood from his pale cheek. He was pursued by some sort of animal, though Peri only glimpsed it through the confusion: red fur, black stripes, feline whiskers. She was already looking for a weapon

– and, as the man fell, whimpering, she snatched a snow globe from a curio stall and raised it in threat.

The crowd parted and the man screamed again as, apparently

without cause, his stomach was torn open. He threw up his hands in a fending-off gesture, and they were criss-crossed with cuts. Peri caught a flash of red-black, and threw the globe. It hit something solid and elicited a squawk. Not letting herself stop to think, she shoulder-charged the invisible monster, feeling its breath on her face. It was wiry, strong… bipedal? And then it broke free of her, sending her sliding across concrete. She was briefly aware of it again, in the corner of her eye, making its escape with a remarkably human gait.

Her first concern was for the victim. She scrambled to him, and

blinked. She couldn't bring him into focus. It was like the man

wasn't quite there – only, when Peri touched his chest, he gave a groan and her hand came away bloodied. She looked for help, and

only now realised that a space had cleared around the pair of them.

People skirted the area, their gazes turned anywhere but here. Some had shielded their eyes with their hands.

'Please,' she pleaded. 'This man needs help. He needs –'

The Doctor burst onto the scene like a one-man cavalry charge –

and, despite their still-fresh disagreement, she had never been more relieved to see him. He dropped to one knee, inspected the victim's wounds. Peri's heart sank as he turned to her with a foreboding

shake of the head.

'What happened here?' he barked at the dying man, without a

hint of sympathy. 'Who – or maybe I should say what – did this to you?'

'Nothing,' the man wheezed. 'I didn't see anything. Nothing I

shouldn't have seen.' And Peri could hardly see him at all now. He was little more than an outline, as if the creature had infected him with its invisibility.

' *Young woman!* '

She jumped at the admonishing voice: the same one as before, but from a different camera pillar. There seemed to be a lot of them 202

about.

' *Young woman, I have warned you about your state of dress, If you persist in this offence, you will give me no alternative but to summon the police.* '

Peri clambered to her feet and gaped into the camera lens.

'You're kidding me, right? A man has just been... been mauled

here. We need an ambulance or something, and all you care about is that I might be showing a bit too much foxglove. I... I mean,

foxglove. Fox – dagnabbit!'

' *A potty month as well!* ' huffed the voice. ' *Well, that's quite enough from you. The sooner you are separated from decent society, the better for us all.* '

Peri had had enough. 'Now you listen here!' she stormed – but

suddenly the Doctor had hold of her elbow and was steering her

away.

'I think we should gain some distance from the scene of the

crime, don't you? Before someone thinks to accuse us of having

been involved.'

Peri looked back over her shoulder, she couldn't help herself. But she could no longer see the injured man – the dead man, almost

certainly, by now – at all. Worse, the market-goers seemed to have forgotten he was ever there. They had closed ranks about him,

trampling the ground where he lay. She felt sick.

'Doctor,' ventured Peri, hurrying to keep up with his long strides as usual, 'I think there might be something wrong. With me, I mean.

It's like... There are certain words I can't seem to say. F – fo –

foxglove. Argh!'

'You seem as voluble as ever to me. "Foxglove"?'

'No! Not 'foxglove". That's not what I... I mean, that's how it

comes out, but –'

'But you intended to say "foxglove".'

'No!'

'As in soft tissue. Brawn. Meat. Sins of the...'

'That's right,' said Peri, surprised.

'Your meaning was perfectly clear to my ears – just evidently not to

your own.' The Doctor stopped suddenly and took Peri's chin in his hands, frowning into her eyes. 'A perceptual barrier, I wonder?'

'Would... would that explain...? The man back there, the one who was... I could see him at first, but then he just... he faded. Like the monster.'

'The monster?'

'The thing, the animal that attacked him, that... that...' A thought occurred to her. '"The scene of the crime", you said? As if you...

You think...?'

'First impressions to the contrary, Peri,' said the Doctor, 'I can assure you, that man's wounds were caused by no animal.'

'It's violence, isn't it?' she realised. 'And the wounds on that man, and... and cuss words and nudity – and as for anything that might be in any way connected to rumpy-pumpy. Did I just say

"rumpy-pumpy"? Well, that proves my point! I can't hear... *No one* here can hear, or see, anything... rude.'

'I take it this is your doing!' Peri thought the Doctor meant her at first, but he was addressing one of the omnipresent cameras. 'What is it? Nanites in the atmosphere, programmed to colonise in the

human brain, to confound the senses, perhaps even edit the

memory? Censorship on a grand scale! Well?'

There was a long pause before the familiar clipped female voice

issued from the speaker again. ' *And who exactly are you?* '

'Doctor...'

Peri had heard footsteps – and now, along the street came four

uniformed men in riot helmets, marching in formation in double

time. They came to a halt and, in unison, snatched black, boxlike devices with aerials from their belts. 'Attention, citizen!' snapped the apparent leader, addressing her. 'You are under arrest for

actions liable to cause offence. You do not have the right to use bad words, nor to find our use of handcuffs in any way stimulating.'

Peri's response was instinctive. With a cry of 'Lotus it, Doctor!'

she darted back towards the market, muttering under her breath,

'What, I can't even say *lotus*?' She heard the Doctor's warning yell, realised too late what it meant, and shrieked as bullets ricocheted off brickwork beside her ear. The devices she had taken to be radios

– they were guns. Something else she hadn't been allowed to see!

The Doctor bowled into the front two officers, and scattered all four. Peri faltered for a moment as he raised his hands in surrender

– then she did what he would have expected of her. She used the

distraction to save herself.

Peri came to a breathless halt, looking for cameras, finding two but reassured that neither pointed her way. She didn't recognise the area in which she found herself. She hoped she wasn't lost. But then she saw a familiar shape behind a half-open gate. It was the TARDIS.

She had walked this road before, only half an hour ago – but then it had looked quite different. The gutters had been rank with litter, the walls daubed with misspelled obscenities. She remembered a

peeling poster: the slogan 'Zeleb is Coming', with a seven-pointed star beneath. A religious message, she had assumed – but now this too was gone. Either a very efficient cleaning crew had just passed 204

this way, or her eyes and ears – and her nose –were being fooled again.

She remembered some of the things she had been careful not to

step in before, and then tried to forget them again.

Then she glanced down, and received a shock. She thought she

had been injured at first, taken a bullet somehow without feeling it.

Her chest was all... mixed up, distorted by what Peri could only describe, once her brain had processed what she was seeing, as a pixellation effect. Her legs, between the hems of her shorts and her

knees, were the same, though an experimental pat-down revealed

that everything was the same shape it had always been. ‘I don’t

believe it,’ she half-laughed to herself, relieved but still shaken, feeling a little giddy, ‘now I’ve been censored too!’

That was when she heard the scrape of a foot, the clattering of an invisible tin can and an intake of breath, and realised she wasn’t alone. There was somebody else here. Someone she couldn’t see.

Or some *thing*...

The room hummed and glowed with the presence of a hundred

screens, arranged in rows about its circular edge. Each one showed an image from the outside world – output, no doubt, from a pillar-mounted camera. In the centre of the room, two more, larger screens were set into a freestanding console, gleaming buttons and winking lights contrasting with a dark wood surround. And at the controls sat an elderly woman in a wing-backed chair. Her silver hair was pulled into a tight bun, and rimless spectacles balanced on the end of her hooked nose.

She looked up, alarmed, as the Doctor breezed in and regarded

his surroundings with a haughty air. ‘How did you get in here?’ she demanded in a familiar clipped voice. She had been knitting, but her needles clattered into her plaid-skirted lap as she fumbled for a recessed red button. ‘I’ve seen you. You’re a sociopath! A common thug! How did you escape from police custody? I’m warning you,

attempt to expose me to your wanton violence and I shall stab your eyes with my needles!’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ sniffed the Doctor, ‘I rarely assault a stranger on a first meeting. There have been exceptions, of course. I must say, what an unpleasant, squalid little world you have here.

Especially when one views it from so many angles.’

The woman’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you mean? What can you

see?’

‘More than you’d like, I’m sure. Dirt, disrepair, decay...

depravity!' The Doctor peered more closely at a screen beside his head, on which two girls were engaged in a ferocious fist fight

outside a grocer's store. Three screens along, a young woman was trying to fend off an older man – and below that, a teenaged boy drew a knife blade across another boy's cheek. 'And what I would judge to be an inordinate amount of violence.' He added archly, 'To which you appear to be turning a blind eye.'

The woman gave a theatrical gasp, and a hand flew to her mouth.

'You *can* see. Oh my goodness gracious, this explains it all. You poor, poor man!' She was jabbing furiously at the red button again.

'I wouldn't put much faith in that silent alarm,' advised the

Doctor. 'I'm afraid I may have damaged it while working on the

detention level door circuits.' He brandished a clutch of severed wires, then cast them aside.

The woman leapt to her feet, paling. 'Now please, I know you

must have seen some horrid, horrid things, and it's only natural you should wish to emulate them – but I'm pleading with you to control your urges. In fact, you must close your eyes!' She pressed a half-finished pink cardigan to the two screens in front of her, fussing with its mismatched sleeves to conceal as much of the pictures as she could. 'Go on, close them. Before it's too late, before you see too much!'

'Am I missing something?' the Doctor frowned. 'You can see

what's happening on these screens too – can't you?'

'Well, of course I can. Somebody has to keep watch, don't they?

Somebody has to be the Monitor.'

'Then isn't it your job to do something? Isn't that why you're

here?' The Monitor seemed deflated by the accusation. 'Well, of

course,' she said, stumbling over her words. 'Of course it is, but I am only one woman.' She let the cardigan go and dropped back into her

chair. As if to prove her intentions, she punched a few buttons to switch the camera feed of the knife-wielding teen to her console, then shrilled into a rounded microphone, ‘You there. Yes, you,

young man. Stop that. Stop that at once. It is extremely naughty... as is that gesture. I can find out where you live, you know. Your

mother will hear of this.’

‘One woman,’ the Doctor reminded her impatiently, ‘backed by a

security force.’

‘Who can’t be everywhere at once,’ insisted the Monitor. ‘Why,

already today I have witnessed three public displays of affection, heard no fewer than four remarks that could be construed as

discriminatory towards a defined gender, ethnic or religious

grouping, and this morning I had the supreme misfortune to catch one wicked man’ – she shuddered as she spoke the next word –

‘tinkling on a street corner.’

But the Doctor was no longer listening. His attention had been

drawn to one of the wall screens, on which he could see Peri

running towards the camera, obviously exhausted.

She slowed to a brisk walking pace, disappeared from shot and

was picked up on the next screen along. She was nervous, looking back over her shoulder as if expecting to be followed though there was no one in sight.

And then, a dark figure glided in front of the camera, and the

Doctor caught a glint of metal in its grip. It had cut ahead of its prey, somehow, was waiting in ambush – and Peri was about to

walk right into it.

‘ *Peri, look out!* ’

Peri started at the sound of the Doctor's voice – and it saved her life. She felt a rush of air in front of her, and something sharp scored the skin of her stomach but failed to cut deep. She backed away from her unseen attacker, but it was bearing down on her. She could hear its footsteps and its wheezing, feel its presence...

' *Dive to your right, Peri, now!* '

She did as instructed, and a warm body hit her side-on, her

attacker having lunged for her and been surprised by her dodge.

They were both on the ground now. Peri tried to stand, but invisible garbage shifted beneath her sandal and threw her balance–and now something, a human hand she thought, had her ankle and she was

being pulled back down.

Gasping and squealing, she lashed out blindly. One hand touched

something flat and firm in the gutter, and she tried to lift it but it was mired in a tangle of barbed wire and sucking mush. The other hand, raised, touched fur and whiskers, and she dug in hard.

Her attacker recoiled with a yelp, tearing its face from her grip, leaving patches of red-black fur under her nails. The 'creature' from the marketplace!

Peri didn't want to think about that, didn't want to think about how it must have followed her, how it could have walked right up to her at any time, leered over her shoulder and she wouldn't have

known.

She redoubled her efforts with the flat, firm object, and extricated it at last as the Doctor's voice crackled over the speaker again.

' *He's coming for you, Peri. Eight o'clock!* '

The furthest end of the plank – the cleaner end, she guessed –

became visible as she swung it, and the impact of wood on bone

almost jarred it from her hands.

' *That's it! Well done, Peri, well done! Now, while he's dazed...* '

‘What?’ she pleaded, still too tired to run, brandishing the plank but clueless as to where the creature was now, which direction it 207

would come from. ‘What do I do?’

‘ *Play him at his own game, Peri. You can’t see your attacker because the nanites in your brain find something about his*

appearance objectionable – but trust me, he’s an ordinary human being. The nanites affect him too. ’

‘You’re not saying…’ Peri glanced down at her pixellated chest, self-consciously. ‘I… I mean, I could take off my clothes… I suppose…’

‘ *Good thinking! Yes, that would do the trick. It would make you as invisible to him as he is to you. But whatever you do, Peri…’*

‘Do it fast. I know.’

‘ *Don’t you dare, young lady,* ’ interrupted a familiar female voice.

‘Doctor, I can’t. All these cameras – it’s like I’m on TV, or…

or…’

‘ *You aren’t on TV, Peri. No one will see you, that’s the whole point!* ’

‘ *You still have an audience. Everything you do has an audience, young lady, and even if they can’t see what you are doing they will know about it. They’ll picture it, create lewd images in their heods, and you will be responsible for that. Is that what you want? To corrupt our children?* ’

The hectoring tone galvanised Peri into action. Her top was half-unfastened before she realised: ‘Hang on… Doctor, won’t you be able to…?’ And she looked heavenward and let out a groan, which returned to her ears as, ‘Oh, notional concept of a creator figure, denominationally specific in this instance but invoked without

prejudice to the tenets of contrasting belief systems.’

Which reminded her of the seven-pointed star on the poster, now

gone.

Which, in turn, gave her an idea.

‘Well,’ huffed the Monitor, ‘I can’t say I disapprove of the

sentiment – though it's a tad late if you ask me – but there is a time and a place for everything. What if a Zelebian or Jontharan were to walk by and see that? What then?'

'No!' The Doctor was staring at the image of his companion, now

transferred to one of the main screens – and his first thought was that the censoring nanites had finally infiltrated even his brain. 'I refuse to believe I'm seeing this. I refuse to believe that Peri would just have given up like...' Then a smile crossed his face. 'Although, hang on, I think I *might* be the one who's been blind here...'

Peri was on her knees, her hands clasped together, shoulders

trembling, eyes closed – and her voice raised in a spirited rendition of the Lord's Prayer. Her stalker was back on his feet, circling, but 208

now he seemed as unable to see his intended victim, or hear her

words, as she was to see him. He lashed out with his knife, once, twice, three times, but sliced only the air.

'Let me guess,' said the Doctor, 'the reason Peri can't see that man is not only because he's armed – that alone wouldn't be

enough – but because of his apparel. The bodysuit, and that mask...

He's disguised himself as an animal, native presumably to this

world. Dare I venture, some religion's sacred beast?'

'It's a tugu,' the Monitor filled in, 'considered unclean by the Zelebians.'

'So, you thought you should spare them the sight of it. How

considerate! And then at some point, I assume, you decided to

extend that protection.'

'Well, it made sense! We'd had complaints. And why should any

one religion be allowed to oppress another by singing its songs and displaying its icons in public?'

'So, for as long as Peri stays on her knees like that, she'll remain protected. But this human tugu of yours doesn't want to give up.'

The Doctor lunged at the control console. ‘She needs help. How do I send the police to that location?’

‘For your information,’ snapped the Monitor, brushing his

questing hands aside, ‘they are en route already. I punched in the code the moment that young jezebel came jiggling into view on my screens again.’

‘I see,’ said the Doctor, ‘and I don’t suppose that was the only code you “punched in” while my back was turned.’ He could

already hear the synchronised tramps of approaching boots.

‘A routine request is considered less urgent than the panic alarm

– but it will still be dealt with in its turn.’

‘It isn’t working, you know,’ the Doctor bellowed as the door

crashed open. ‘You think you can educate your people, change their nature, by keeping them ignorant – but look around you, Monitor.

Look what’s happening out there!’

‘Teething problems,’ she said dismissively, as four officers piled onto the Doctor. ‘We haven’t got the programming quite right yet, that’s all. Why, until a few years ago, we still allowed examiners to issue failing grades! But things will change. In time, everyone will forget all the nasty, the licentious, the discouraging and the

downright offensive things in the world, and then they will stop adding to them!’

‘You’ve lost all sense of perspective!’ the Doctor accused her,

still struggling though his wrists were now manacled behind his

back. ‘You’re building a world in which nobody is allowed to

disagree with you!’

He was being dragged through the door, and the Monitor had

turned her back on him, her fingernails clacking against a keyboard.

‘That coat of yours is bringing on a migraine,’ she sniffed. ‘I should have censored violent colour combinations a long time ago. I don’t see why decent people should have to put up with them.’

‘ *Attention, any citizens in this area. You will desist from censored behaviour immediately, and show yourselves.* ’

Peri swallowed and continued to pray, although her voice

wavered with uncertainty. She regretted her decision as a barrage of gunfire assailed her ears, aimed blindly, missing her only because she was kneeling. She would have thrown up her hands right then, but for a deep-throated cry that told her someone else had been less fortunate.

Four police officers tackled the same empty spot. One of them

yelped and fell back, his forearm pixellated – but the others now seemed to have things under control. One of them yanked a piece of red-black cloth clear from the mêlée, and their prisoner blinked into view. He was middle-aged, surprisingly thin, with white, wispy

hair, rheumy eyes and what appeared to be patches of red carpet

strapped to his body. His hands were now cuffed, but he spat

defiantly: ‘Get off me! Get off me, you bunch of chrysanthemums!’

Peri was shuffling away, scuffing her knees on the hard road

surface. Now, judging that no eyes would be upon her for the next few seconds, she risked climbing to her feet, still muttering her prayer, and she ran.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Rondo the stallholder, ‘how did you get away from the rehabilitation centre?’

‘And were I to explain the effects of certain sonic frequencies

upon magnetic locking systems,’ sighed the Doctor, ‘I suspect you would remain little the wiser. So, if you could just remain silent and allow me to conclude this rather delicate operation...’ He was

squatting beside a camera pillar, surrounded by battered-looking computer parts from Rondo’s stall. He had managed to prise open

an inspection panel and pull out a snarl of wires, to which he was

connecting a fire-blackened, half-melted keyboard. He and Rondo were right in the middle of the busy marketplace – but, as before, harried shoppers averted their gazes from the crime in their midst. They must have known there was something going on, even if they couldn't clearly see what it was – but the Doctor supposed they were afraid of being pronounced corrupted, sent for 'rehabilitation' themselves.

'And you say the Monitor can't see us now?' queried Rondo.

'You've fixed that too with your sonic doodads?'

'This camera is now broadcasting the same five minutes of footage in an unending loop. As long as she doesn't peer too closely...'

Rondo squinted into the camera lens – then, experimentally, he flicked two fingers at it. When the gesture provoked no response, he giggled and repeated it.

'There is one thing you can tell me,' said the Doctor, 'since you seem to insist on conversing. How did you let this happen? How did your people come to let that woman decide what you should and should not experience?'

'Oh, there was a debate,' Rondo assured him. 'The government, they said it was everybody's right not to be offended, and, well, you couldn't argue with that.'

'I'm sure I could muster a few contrary words.'

'No, no, I mean literally, you couldn't argue. Anyone who tried, we had the police at our doom, accusing us of intolerance. There were lawsuits, people claiming millions for hurt feelings. One poor kid had to pay out for winning a board game. In the end, we learned it was

best to say nothing.'

'See no evil...' grumbled the Doctor.

'You... you seem to know more than most,' ventured Rondo.

'Can you tell me...? Do you know where babies come from? It's

just... There seem to be a lot of them about these days, more than there's ever been, only no one's allowed to say...'

'Do you know what offends me, Rondo? More than anything else

I've encountered here?' The Doctor was sitting cross-legged on the filthy ground now, his fingers a blur over the keyboard, his eyes narrowed to slits as he recalled the codes he had seen used only once. Rondo just shrugged, so he answered his own question:

'I'm offended by the sound of that infuriating woman's voice.'

'I don't get it,' said Peri. 'We're just leaving? Just like that?'

'What did you expect we'd do?' asked the Doctor. 'Overthrow

the government of a world in one night? Free its people?'

'Well... yeah. I kinda did.'

'No need. You see that man over there?'

Peri followed the direction of the Doctor's nod, but all she could see was an empty street corner. 'Nope.'

'No? Well, I'm not surprised. But the Monitor can see him, and

she's none too happy.'

'How can you know that? I mean, you said she had lots of

screens, one for each of these cameras. She can't be looking at them all at once, can she?'

A smile tugged at the Doctor's lips. 'You can't hear her, can

you?'

‘Can’t hear what?’

‘I had to be sure. You see, Peri, I’ve done something rather

clever.’

‘And yet you’ve managed to resist bragging about it for, ooh, at least a minute.’

‘I hacked into the Monitor’s network and inserted a line of code into the nanites’ programming. It’s already starting to take effect.’

Peri grinned. ‘Oh, I get it. You’ve censored her. You’ve censored the Monitor!’

‘From now on, she will be seen and heard by nobody, not even

the members of her own police force. Her remote reprimands will

have no effect.’

‘So, she’s just jabbering away over her speakers, telling that man to stop... whatever it is he’s doing, and he doesn’t even know?’

‘Actually,’ said the Doctor, ‘our watchful friend has now selected a fresh target for her ire.’ He indicated another camera as they passed it, and Peri saw that it was turning to follow them. ‘And it’s perhaps just as well you can’t hear her. Some of the language she’s using would make you blush.’

They approached the gate behind which the TARDIS waited.

‘Can’t she just undo what you did?’ asked Peri.

‘Eventually,’ said the Doctor, ‘but only by rebooting the entire system, something I didn’t have nearly enough time to do myself.’

‘And you don’t think she’ll do that?’

‘Oh, I’m sure she will – because the one thing the Monitor won’t be able to stand, the one thing that will upset her more than any insult could, is being ignored.’

‘So, while the Monitor is preparing her new batch of nanites...’

‘The effects of the old batch will wear off. Right, Peri!’

‘And everyone will be able to see, and say, everything they

couldn’t before. They’ll see their world – the state it’s in – for the first time in… in generations.’

The Doctor paused with his key in the TARDIS lock. ‘Of course,

it will be up to them to decide what they do about that–whether they wish to accept the truth or go back to hiding from it. Somehow,

though, I doubt anyone will be able to stifle the debate a second time.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ said Peri. ‘If it were me, finding out I’d been lied to my entire life… well, I think I’d feel pretty *flowering* offended!’

iNtRUsioNs

Dave Hoskin

An adventure of the First Doctor

The postman upended his sack, and letters cascaded onto the floor like a haul of fish. Sam picked up a handful and then walked away without a backward glance. Behind him, the postman shook the

final stragglers loose and threw the sack over his shoulder. Sam didn’t even see him leave. He’d already shuffled through the letters, and before he sat down he’d separated the bills from the personal correspondence. Putting the bills aside, he eagerly started flicking through the personal mail.

His eyes lit up as he found a green envelope. Deftly, he turned it over, slipped his thumb underneath the flap and gutted it in one smooth motion. He pulled out the paper inside and carefully

unfolded it.

Something inside him began to glow. He recognised the round,

friendly handwriting. It had been weeks since she’d written, and Sam had started to wonder if he’d somehow missed her letters.

Certainly it was possible…

He forced himself to take a deep breath. Then he started reading.

Dear Dad,

Just a quick one, sorry! Everything here revolves around the sleeping patterns of an extremely noisy little boy, and I've been struggling to find time for anything! Of course it's so nice to have someone making noise in my house other than me. Almost worth suffering through the whole weird situation leading up to now – you know what I mean!

I hope you're OK. I always think of you at this time of year – Mum's birthday and all that. I worry about the food they give you, and whether you've got something decent to read. Maybe I'll send you a book this year that I've been reading.

Oops, got to go. I hear something that sounds like Fe-Fi-Fo-Fum!

Your loving daughter,

Natalie

Sam smiled and stared out the window.

213

It was only when he began refolding the letter that he noticed the stray sentence just below the main body of text. Sam frowned. The handwriting was unfamiliar, clumsier, and at first glance he was sure he'd misread it. It said, 'i wAtChd heR feeed hEr Baby

yEsteRdAy. He looKed reely hUngRy.'

Eleven words, all harmless in isolation. And yet, just by reading them, Sam felt his entire life unravelling. The intruder words

crowded everything else from his mind, until the only thing left was i wAtChd heR feeed hEr Baby yEsteRdAy. He looKed Rely

hUngRy.

When at last he recovered, Sam could concentrate on forcing the

two sentences into some kind of perspective. The problem was not what they *said* exactly; indeed when viewed dispassionately both sentences were almost entirely innocuous. But it was the context that made them seem such a violation. Written just below Natalie's cheerful fluff, the jagged, misshapen handwriting looked like the work of someone *unstable*. This was the voice of someone barely in control of their own handwriting, to say nothing of their willingness to

vandalise private mail. Sam couldn't help picturing this voice's owner peering in Natalie's window as she breastfed her new baby.

Couldn't help wondering what someone like that would do next.

Intellectually, Sam knew that his imagination was providing

plenty of the context all by itself. Natalie was very special to him, and he'd always ascribed to her a kind of purity that barely existed in this day and age. When he read her letters he imagined himself inside a little world with room for only two kindred spirits. For this most private of places to be invaded in such a fashion just felt *wrong*.

But even as Sam forced down the feelings of panic, he couldn't

help worrying that he'd been caught again. Couldn't help

wondering if someone had been *wAtChing* him as well. Because Sam had a secret. He did prize Natalie's letters and he'd collected all that he could find, but in truth none of them were addressed to him. They never had been and they never would.

Because Sam had never met Natalie. And he wasn't her father.

Strictly speaking, Sam should never have been reading Natalie's

letters. Strictly speaking, he wasn't supposed to read anybody's, and in fairness he very rarely did. The Dead Letter Office received over 15,000 pieces of undeliverable mail every day and Sam was one of its fastest operators. Every letter he received was checked for clues.

He'd try to decipher the addressee's details, and failing that, the sender's. If that yielded nothing, he'd slice the letter open and check inside.

Again, strictly speaking, Sam was only supposed to look at the

beginning and the end of the letters – that's where people usually put the address they'd forgotten to write on the envelope. If they hadn't, the last resort was to skim through the rest of the text. Like most of the Office's old-timers, Sam knew how to scan for

keywords and ignore the rest. If the skim-read failed, the letter was pronounced officially dead and shredded.

Natalie's letter *should* have been shredded. It was addressed to her father in Pentridge Prison, and Pentridge had closed down years ago. Natalie hadn't put a return address on her green envelope, and most mail like that was routinely destroyed. But every now and

then, when something piqued his interest, Sam broke the rules.

Usually the letters he read were weird or salacious, but there was something forlornly sweet about Natalie's. She'd never met her

father. Her mother had refused to talk about him, and it was only on her deathbed that she'd revealed his last known whereabouts.

Natalie had been her mother's carer and she'd lived a lonely life.

She had no real friends and Sam could tell the letter to her unknown father was as much for Natalie's benefit as for its supposed

recipient. She didn't really expect a reply; she simply wanted

someone to *listen*.

And, in a way, Sam fell in love. Because he knew how she felt.

Because, ultimately, she sounded a lot like him, and he'd never met anyone like that before. So he kept her letter and *wAtChd* for more.

This certainly wasn't easy – the sheer volume of mail flowing

through the Dead Letter Office would have daunted anyone. But

Sam was determined, and it helped that Natalie seemed to prefer

green envelopes. Without fail, that's how her letters arrived. All addressed to a father she'd never met, and all saved from oblivion by Sam. He knew it was wrong, but partly because it was forbidden and partly because she filled a gap in his life, he couldn't bring himself to stop.

For a time, he was happy.

Until he read the words *I wAtChd her feeed hEr Baby yEsteRdAy*.

He looKed reely hUngry.

The worst thing was wondering who had written it. The intruder

could be any number of people, and for every possibility there were unpleasant ramifications. Could it be that Natalie had discovered what he was doing? Was this... revenge on her part? Or had

someone managed to tamper with Natalie's mail? Perhaps even

someone from the Dead Letter Office itself..?

The shame of being exposed like this ate at him like acid. Perhaps this was their way of punishing him. They'd *wAtChd* him break the rules for long enough and now they'd break a few to scare him

straight After all, this wasn't the first time he'd been caught.

Sam took a deep breath, struggling to regain control. So far he

hadn't dared to look up at his co-workers. If they were responsible for this he certainly didn't want to give them the satisfaction of a show. The best thing to do – the only thing that would really clear his head – would be to identify the intruder. Once he'd solved that mystery he could figure out his next move.

He closed his eyes.

Steeled himself.

Then he opened his eyes again and looked around at the sorting

area of Melbourne's Dead Letter Office.

It wasn't the same place any more, or at least that's how it felt.

Just as those intruder words had completely redefined how Sam felt about himself, now he couldn't help looking at the Office through different eyes. No one seemed to be *wAtChing* him, but Sam couldn't banish his feeling of unease. Still trying to appear casual, he put Natalie's letter to one side and started processing another handful of mail. He continued like this for fifteen minutes. He

didn't look up once.

By the time he finished the batch of letters he'd formulated a plan of attack. He stood up and headed across the Office towards the

trophy wall. He was slightly surprised to see an old man he didn't

recognise standing in front of it. He was peering through a pair of reading glasses at one of the mounted letters, muttering darkly.

Civilians weren't allowed in the Dead Letter Office, but Sam figured the old man couldn't have got in without permission.

Deciding to ignore him, he started his own examination of the letters framed on the wall.

The trophy wall had been created after some letters had achieved almost legendary status among the clerks. People sent all kinds of weird things in the mail, and a misaddressed selection had been kept for posterity. Live snakes had been stuffed and mounted alongside a genuine supermodel's underwear, a wedding dress and a mummified human finger. The centrepiece was an aeroplane propeller that had turned up in a package entirely on its own.

Sometimes Sam imagined that someone had been sending a whole plane piece by piece. He wondered whether somebody else had reassembled the aircraft and was still waiting for a propeller that would never arrive.

But it was the letters Sam was interested in. He knew there was something familiar about that handwriting, and he was sure he'd seen it on one of the trophies. Pulling up a chair to get a closer look, he scoured the wall. He didn't notice the old man looking up at him.

Nor he did see him turn and walk away.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he found it. Scrawled across the top of a dead letter, Sam could just make out more of that distinctive handwriting. He reached up and unhooked the framed letter. Froze.

iS tHis woT yoov bEEn looKing fOr? cLeveR boy!

Sam's stomach twisted as he read the words. Then he read them again. And again. He wanted to be sure he hadn't made a mistake.

Then he opened the frame, tucked the letter into his jacket and walked back quietly toward his desk.

His head was so full of this new message that he didn't see the old man rifling through his desk until the last moment. Forcing the taunting phrase into the back of his mind, Sam cleared his throat as sternly as he could. The old man didn't look up.

Sam tried again. 'Excuse me, sir... but what the hell are you doing?'

Ignoring Sam, the old man started reading Natalie's letter. A real fear began taking hold of Sam, a fear of these creepy messages and, oddly, a fear of losing them to someone else. He snatched Natalie's letter away. 'Sir...' he began again, but now the old man's eyes were on him.

'Yes, yes, young man, I'm not deaf.'

'This is *private* mail, sir.'

'I'm well aware of that.' The old man's voice was serrated with irritation. 'As it happens I am looking for a piece of private mail. The mail you people managed to lose.'

Sam held up Natalie's letter. 'I am absolutely sure that *tHis iS not wOt* you're... not your letter,' he said.

The old man's eyes narrowed like a carrion bird and suddenly Sam felt very small. Then, as if a switch were thrown, the old man nodded agreeably. 'Yes, yes, of course, you're quite right,' he said.

'My mistake.' He stood up from Sam's desk, checking his watch. 'Is that the time?'

Still clutching Natalie's letter, Sam watched the old man walk out of the office.

His mind had already begun to race again.

woT pot bEEn looKing fOr

wAtChd her feeed hEr Baby

cLeveR bOy

His desk was covered in gutted letters.

Almost everybody had left by now. None had said goodbye and,

even if they had, Sam would not have heard. His mind was fizzing with theories and connections and, although a headache was

reaching critical mass, he continued tearing open mail at a feverish

rate. The messages seemed to tease him, feeding him scraps of

coherence that always seemed just on the verge of revealing their true meaning. Each new fragment sharpened the focus, and even

Who'd wanted to, it was almost impossible for him to stop picking at the mystery.

He'd started calling them *intrusions*. He'd seen scribblings like this in books and knew the proper term was marginalia. This was

different though – marginalia was an attack on something official, published, monolithic. By contrast, the intrusions haunted the edges of people's personal thoughts, invading spaces always intended to be private. Some heckled at the content of the host letters, others appeared totally oblique, still others felt like veiled threats aimed directly at Sam. All were written in that serial killer scrawl and, even more importantly, all the phrases stuck to his tongue like a burn.

dO yoU dreem in CoLOuR?

mEEt foRe the MeAt eATer

STUPID stupid mAn

home isS wHeRe yOre hEarT IsS

aRe yoU tHinKing wOt im thiNkinG?

He still wasn't sure how the writing actually got in there.

Weirdly, the envelopes never showed any sign of tampering. Sam

remembered his mum writing a message on the shell of an egg and

then hard-boiling it. When Sam had cracked the shell he'd found the message had somehow soaked through onto the egg's soft flesh,

leaving no trace at all on the exterior. But how would you do that with mail?

He'd found so many intrusions – well over fifty – that he'd

decided to assemble all the affected pages into a homemade book. It was a crude, uneven thing held together with loops of string, but it did mean he could find all the intrusions in one place. He couldn't exactly explain why that was important, but somehow it felt like something he had to do. He looked up at the aeroplane propeller on the trophy wall, thinking about posting a thousand separate

components from one place to another. Perhaps when he assembled

all the intrusions he'd be able to see what kind of plane he'd

discovered.

He flicked the pages of the book. The intrusions became a blur.

Just thinking about the messages flickering past got him started again. Were they some kind of code? The intruder seemed to have a thing for random capital letters... but what if they weren't random?

Or were they all part of some larger message that he hadn't

uncovered yet? Sam began scribbling notes, reminders and theories on the affected pages. Something inside him knew he had to hurry, 218

knew that the intruder wouldn't wait for Sam to find him. Once

he'd stopped playing hide-and-seek, once he'd *wAtChd* Sam long enough... what then?

His head stabbed at him again, and he sat back reluctantly,

waiting for the pain to subside.

aRe yoU tHinKing wOt im thiNkinG?

As his mind toyed with the phrase, he continued doodling random

shapes. It was eleven o' clock before he finally went home.

He didn't see the person that watched him leave the office.

The headache woke him up the next morning. Sam took two aspirin.

Thirty minutes later, two more. He briefly considered calling in sick, but soon began packing his bag for work. Behind the

headache, his mind still churned with the thought that someone

reely hUngry was on the prowl. He had to get to them before they got to him, and the office was the only source of new information that might save him. Trying to ignore the pain, he stared at the pavement all the way to the station.

After boarding the train, he pulled out his jury-rigged book of

letters. He began drawing again, filling up the corners and the

margins with random little curves and lines. Even as the pain spiked and he closed his eyes, his hand kept moving. Somehow it felt like the right thing to do.

cLeveR bOy

Gradually the feeling of being *wAtChd* crept back. Sam was sure he could feel a gaze. Could swear that someone, maybe even

someone reely hungry was on the train.

Carefully, he opened his eyes.

Directly across from him sat a businessman. He was completely

unremarkable, but Sam kept *wAtChing* him right up until the train plunged into a tunnel.

For a long moment, the lights went out.

Sam half-expected the businessman to disappear, but when the

lights returned he hadn't moved at all.

iS tHis woT yoov bEEn looKing fOr?

Something very like a long black maggot blindly squirmed its

way out of the businessman's hairline and oozed down his forehead.

The businessman paid it no attention. Not even when it reached his eye.

Just as it disappeared into the man's tear duct, Sam recognised

what it was. Not a maggot, but... words. A *sentence*.

A sentence had just crawled down the man's face.

A sentence consisting of the words, *she's going to tell him*

For just a moment, Sam couldn't take in what had happened.

219

And then *need to delete those emails* uncoiled from the

businessman's ear. And another. Trickling upward from his shirt

collar. Sam could see the businessman's entire train of thought.

Three seats away, a grossly fat woman stared out at the rushing

darkness of the tunnel. Sentences heaved over the contours of her chubby cheeks, betraying how *hUngry* she felt.

Next to the fat woman, lyrics swirled around the eyes of a

teenager, pulsing to the beat of her iPod.

And Sam could see it. Written all over their faces.

He could see what *everyone was thinking*.

The old man was waiting for him at the Office's front entrance. Sam tried to ignore him, but the old man blocked his way.

'I'm sorry young man, but I can't allow you to go any further,' he said.

'Why's that?'

'Quarantine.'

The word hit Sam like a truck. Suddenly it all made a horrible kind of sense.

'It was anthrax wasn't it?' said Sam. 'Someone put anthrax in those letters.'

'Not exactly,' said the old man. 'You're right about where you

were infected, but I'm afraid this virus isn't anthrax.'

'Isn't... who did this to me?'

'The mail you've been collecting...' The old man hesitated, looking for the right words. 'I can see it's already begun to change you, and I suspect those changes could have dire consequences.'

At these last words, Sam looked directly into the old man's face for the first time. The thoughts written there were *different*. Instead of trickling worm-sentences, the old man's face was covered in a swarm of symbols Sam had never seen before. Even if he could have

translated them, they were moving far too quickly to be understood, and something in Sam felt fundamentally revolted.

And then, all the pain inside his head seemed to *lunge*. The old man's thoughts shattered under some invisible impact, and he fell to the pavement.

Not noticing the blood that had begun trickling from his nose, Sam ran inside the office and locked the door.

He didn't see the young woman until he turned around. She stood at the customer service desk, a baby balanced on her hip. Sam hadn't seen her before, but as soon as she saw him she looked angry. 'Do you work here?' she asked.

Sam looked around. They were alone. He couldn't just ignore her.

'I'm sorry, Mrs...?' he began.

'Miss Natalie Bryce.' She held up a green envelope and Sam's

head throbbed. Surely this couldn't be his Natalie...

'I think someone's been fiddling with my mail,' she said.

‘Um. What makes you say that?’ He walked closer, still struggling to believe she was actually here.

She handed the envelope to Sam and pointed to something on the

front. He saw the rubber-stamped words: ADDRESS NO LONGER

CURRENT – RETURN TO SENDER. I must have missed one, he

thought. But my Natalie *never* puts a return address on her mail.

That’s why it always ends up here...

He turned the envelope over. Natalie’s return address was written neatly on the back. She’d changed the habit of a lifetime.

‘I’ve been writing to Pentridge for ages,’ she said. ‘And when this came back with the stamp, I found out it’s been closed for years. So why hasn’t my mail bounced back before now?’

Completely discombobulated, Sam couldn’t even look Natalie in

the ace. His gaze settled on her baby instead, the baby that must have been *reely hUngry*. For some reason there was something soothing about his ace and it took Sam a couple of seconds to figure it out.

Then it registered: the baby’s face was virtually unmarked by

trickling thoughts. Occasionally, blurry shapes flickered across his cheeks, but otherwise... nothing at all. His head must still be *soft*, Sam thought. Still developing. No real ideas yet. He tried to concentrate on Natalie, but something was compelling him to stare at that kid.

‘There was something funny on my letter too,’ said Natalie. Sam’s attention snapped back into focus.

‘ *This* letter?’

‘Uh-huh. But I didn’t put it there...’

Sam was already walking away. Natalie tried to grab his arm,

swinging him back around.

‘Hey, did you know your nose is bleeding?’

Something *lunged* again. Natalie staggered back and the baby began to

scream.

Leaving a trail of blood, Sam ran for the sorting area, clutching the final letter. Ignoring his co-workers' shocked looks, he reached his desk and pulled out his book of clues. This *had* to be the last piece of the puzzle. Whatever was written in here would make sense of it all.

And then... well, if the old man was right about a virus, Sam would figure out some way to get his revenge. His head didn't have room for anything more sophisticated than that.

He pulled out Natalie's last letter. Ignoring her handwriting, he scoured the page for the intrusion that must be there. And then, much larger than usual, he saw it.

221

tiMe tO sWitCH thE liTeS oN

For a very long time, those six words were the only thing his mind could understand. Then he began flipping through the letter-book. He was sure the phrases must form a longer message. He snipped the

string that bound the pages together, attempting to find a meaningful place to insert the new intrusion.

But he couldn't find one.

Furiously, his eye fell on his own scribbles. All available space was covered in the notes and odd little pictures he'd drawn while his mind had been on screensaver. Sam re-read what he'd written, searching for something he'd overlooked.

And then something bloomed in his mind.

Dates.

He reordered the letters once again. Checked the head of each page, noting the date written by the original sender. Organised them with the newest letter at the front through to the oldest letter at the back.

He tapped the pages into alignment, and read them in their new order.

Still nothing. A growl of frustration became a cough. Lost in

thought, he didn't see the fine cloud of red particles settling on his desktop. He coughed again.

The feeling that there was something important inside the book

kept nagging at him. Holding it in his left hand, he pressed his right thumb to the wad of pages, letting them flicker past. Maybe a

keyword would jump out at him...

Something moved. Something in the lower right hand corner of

every page.

Sam stopped. It was his drawings. One on every page, always in the lower right-hand corner. He peeled back the edge of the first page.

The drawing on the next corner had more detail. On its successor, even more. And it was *growing*. He'd barely been thinking about what he'd doodled, but on the corner of every page something was forming.

He flicked the first couple of pages. The pictures moved again,

jittering past like a crude animated film.

tiMe tO sWItCH the liTeS oN

He raised the book until it filled his field of vision. Until only one symbol, one idea could be perceived. Then his right thumb grasped the pages' edges.

And let them blur.

tiMe

Random lines at first, but growing

tO

fast, developing as each

sWitCH

222

corner added more detail,

thE

and then he saw the image that had leaked from

liTeS

his head when he'd been thinking about the intrusions.

ON

The penultimate corner stuck to his thumb.

Sam stared at the picture of a baby that had formed in seconds out of his scribble.

And then, as the penultimate page freed itself, the scribble-baby's eyes snapped open.

Inside Sam's head, the *liTeS* came *oN*.

Window glass littered the floor of Natalie Bryce's bedroom. A green envelope fluttered onto the carpet. Natalie's return address was clearly visible, just above the bloody fingerprints.

The curtains were drawn all through the house, and Sam allowed

his eyes to adjust to the gloom. His breathing was rusty with blood, but that aside, his body was completely motionless. There was no sign that he'd just walked seven miles across the city, nor any hint of excitement at reaching his destination. Just an eerie stillness as he waited for the idea inside his head to motivate his next action.

The baby's cry drifted down the hallway and instantly he began

prowling towards the sound. Quickly pinpointing its direction, he stopped in front of a door with a happy yellow duck on it. The baby sounded pained, probably because of his earlier abortive *lunge*. This time he'd do it properly. The baby's head was soft and Sam was

hUngry and at *last* the *liTeS* were *oN*. His bloodstained hand rested momentarily on the door handle. Then, as quietly as possible, he slipped inside.

He could still hear the baby, but he couldn't see it. Jerkily, Sam stepped forward, following the sound. He reached the cot against the wall and lifted the blankets. The cry peaked even louder as the baby monitor was exposed. Sam picked it up and stared at it, trying to figure out why this bad happened. Briefly, motivation failed him.

Behind him, the door slammed shut. Wincing in pain, Sam turned

around to see the old man standing in his way.

The monitor fell from his fingers. It cracked as it hit the floor and the baby's voice cut off. Sam coughed, assessing his options.

Before he could think of anything the old man spoke. For some

reason Sam could barely hear him. It was as if he didn't even have room in his head for sound any more. All that managed to filter

through was the raw *idea* of the old man's words. Young man, it's vitally important that you listen to me, he said. I'm quite sure pact of 223

you is aware of how dangerous you've become. I can help you, but in order to do that it's imperative that you listen.

cLeveR bOy! said Sam's tongue. Then, with a great effort it snarled defiantly, *tiMe tO sWitCH Baby oN*.

Yes, yes, I thought that's what you were after. He's quite safe I assure you, said the old man. His eyes narrowed then, and when he spoke again, all traces of self-satisfaction had disappeared. I told you before that you'd been infected with a virus. But it's worse than that.

The truth is you were targeted by a virus. A virus of the mind.

Sam roared and swung a fist at the old man. But he was weak now.

Slow. The old man caught his arm and pushed him back with

surprising strength. He began to speak again, and his words were like a scalpel, pushing and probing at the intruder behind Sam's eyes.

What do your people call them, hmmm? Ah yes – memes. That's the

word I was looking for.

Deep inside Sam's mind, something guttered. He didn't articulate the question, but somehow the old man still seemed to hear it. Try to think of it as simply a unit of information, he said. It's *not* mysterious and all-powerful, although I'm sure it would like you to think that.

No, the truth is that it's nothing more than an *idea*, albeit a particularly nasty one.

Sam's head tried to look away, to concentrate on something else, but

somehow the last remnants of his personality clung to the old man's words.

I couldn't say how this particular meme got into the postal system, he continued. Ordinarily they're random, mindless things. But in your case, my boy... your case is clearly an exception, hmm? The old

man's face darkened. I'm afraid it's your misfortune to be afflicted by an idea with ambitions above its station.

The old man stared at Sam, searching for signs of resistance. You couldn't have known, he said. No no, of course you couldn't. The highest purpose of any meme is to be passed on to as many hosts as possible. People like you are simply the means to that end. Other infections might cause you to sing or build a better mousetrap, but this one... well, you know better than I the web it's been causing you to weave.

Sam could feel something squirming furiously inside his mind,

something that longed to silence the flow of corrosive information.

Sam's personality, or rather the deep-rooted idea of his personality, was beginning to strengthen as the old man put the intruder into a context. Each new fact seemed to box the squirming thing into

parameters, almost as if the old man were a magician that could cage a demon because he knew its secret name.

But what are those ambitions, eh? the old man continued.

Obviously it wants to infect other hosts, but I believe it wants far more than that. It wants *efficiency*. To be free of ink and paper as its means of transmission, to pass directly from mind to mind. Of course your species isn't normally blessed with telepathy, but given its native habitat, the meme already has access to the, hmm, machinery of

government, so to speak. Each of those little phrases you discovered has been changing the way your mind thinks, and over time the way your mind works. It's primed you like a rifle, young man. Slowly of course, but then how else could you have survived such a process?

Sam coughed again, the pain racking his entire body. The old man watched the flecks of blood fall onto the carpet before he spoke again.

I'm afraid we have less time than I thought, he said. That's your intruder's other little hurdle, you see. An adult mind is already teeming with competitor ideas, the accumulation of a lifetime. The physical changes to enable telepathy can't be enacted without, hmm, grinding the gears somewhat. Ideally, your intruder would like to mentally infect thousands of people. As things stand, I imagine it will barely manage *one* transmission before the damage becomes too great. The old man smiled thinly, stroking his cheek. It certainly mustered quite a punch before though. Some kind of instinctive

survival spasm, I shouldn't wonder.

His voice softened. It's brought you here very deliberately, he said.

That child is a perfect target, but it can't read the meme in its native state. But with your new ability, limited though it is, you could broadcast that virus directly into the baby's mind. Before it could read, speak or even understand language, the meme would control its development. There would be no competition, no grinding of gears.

The telepathic ability would be built up without the unfortunate side effects. Mass infection would become a reality.

The old man took a final step towards Sam, his gaze unblinking.

That child would be the first of a new race, he said. Without

imagination and without purpose. You can see, can't you, why I

cannot allow that to occur?

Sam stared at the old man's face. He saw the strange thought-

symbols slowing down, hardening into patterns almost like war paint.

The old man grasped his shoulders. His face filled Sam's field

ofvision, those terrifying alien thoughts impossible to ignore.

Something deep inside Sam's mind crouched at bay, thwarted and

desperate. Suddenly, what was left of Sam felt the *hUngry* meme lunge at the old man, and as it leapt from his mind, the last remnant of Sam's personality was swept along with it...

...and things stopped making sense.

There was no sound or light. Just an impression of vast and

terrifying *space*. The meme-cluster couldn't think exactly, but it still had senses of a kind. The problem was that none of its senses could interpret anything about this new environment. There seemed to be more dimensions than there should be, and its smell and

texture was so exotic as to be virtually meaningless.

It tried to assert itself. Its

jagged

voice

sCreaMed.

ClaWeD

foR

pUrcHase.

But there was nothing for it to grasp.

Nothing that it even knew *how* to grasp. This was an *alien* place, and whatever the meme did simply didn't translate. It was small.

Insignificant.

Lost.

In the baby's room, the Doctor opened up his eyes. For the briefest of moments a look of regret chased across the old man's face. He produced Sam's book of infected letters, and then, after some

muttering, fished a box of matches from his waistcoat.

He watched the pages burn until there was nothing left but ash,

and then stamped on the remains, grinding it into the carpet. Finally, he turned his gaze to Sam's body.

And by the time Natalie returned home that night, there was no

sign that either Sam or the Doctor had ever been there at all.

Breadcrumbs

James Moran

An adventure of the Fourth Doctor, with Romana

The Doctor looked around, sighing. The island was so small, he could actually see all the way across it. Three stubby, embarrassed-looking trees skulked here and there, while bleached patches of grass stained the rest of it. No people, no shelter, no help. He sighed again, then once more for effect.

'Oh well,' he said, to nobody in particular. 'Better get on with it, I suppose. At least I know it'll work.'

Romana had been dropping some seriously heavy hints for quite a

while. She wanted a holiday, some time off from the trouble they always seemed to get into. But if she just said it outright, the Doctor might not be keen. Better to let him think it was his idea all along.

Which is why she had been wearing a succession of holiday outfits,

'just seeing if they fit', in the ever decreasing hope that he'd get the message.

The Doctor, on the other hand, had noticed the hints, but was

trying to see how long he could pretend not to notice them before she caved in. If they hadn't picked up the strange signal, the game might have dragged on for months.

'That's odd,' said the Doctor, tapping a dial. 'Seems to be coming from several different directions at the same time.'

'Does it?' said Romana, determinedly bouncing a beach ball off

the console.

'Yes. Could be a sensor echo, the multiple signals are all the

same.'

The ball bounced towards the Doctor, stopping by his feet.

Romana coughed. Then again, louder.

‘Could you throw the ball back over here?’

‘Sorry?’

‘The ball. The *beach* ball.’

‘Oh, is that what it is?’

He idly kicked it back to her. She rolled her eyes, and went to the 227

console, calling up information on the signal.

‘It’s not a sensor echo,’ she said. ‘And they’re not the same. It’s lots of very similar signals. There you go, mystery solved. Now, where should we go next? Maybe somewhere we can use this beach

ball...’

The Doctor stared at the data displayed on the screen.

‘You’re right. I mean, of course you’re right, why wouldn’t you

be? But look at this. They’re not signals at all, they’re... fragments.

Physical signal fragments, I’ve never seen anything like it. The TARDIS is picking them up, but they’re not transmitting, not in the usual sense. Can you feel them? Like a time disturbance, but more gentle, like little pinpricks in the arm. Can’t you feel them?’

‘No.’

‘Can’t be a time disturbance then, or we’d both feel it. Let’s

collect a few of them, and see what happens.’

The beach ball bounced off his head, a little bit too hard. Romana strode out of the room, annoyed. The Doctor watched her go and

called after her.

‘You forgot your beach ball!’

Several hours later, ten of the signal fragments had been collected.

They were strange things, little blurs of sound and light, contained in a large glass container that used to house fish. The fish had met with

an unfortunate accident one day when the Doctor was doing

some chemistry experiments. He didn't replace them. Time Lords

aren't good with pets. He flicked some buttons, and turned a dial.

The fragments in the glass box glowed slightly, then went back to the way they were. The Doctor's face fell.

'Ah. Come on, don't be like that.'

He turned the dial again, with the same result. Romana strolled

in, wearing a different outfit.

'Problems?'

'It's a three-dimensional signal, broken up into these fragments.

But the signal won't decode, I don't have all the pieces yet. And I don't even have anything that could decode it.'

'Oh well, never mind. Look, this one still fits, too. Haven't worn it for ages. When's the last time I wore it? Let me think... oh yes! It was in Paris, when we were on holiday. Over a year ago. That was a lovely holiday, that holiday in Paris we had, over a year ago. Paris is perfect for holidays, isn't it? Just sitting around, in Paris, on holiday, enjoying the holiday in Paris, with –'

The Doctor clapped his hands together suddenly, and leaped up.

'Romana!'

'Yes?'

'Do you know what we need to do?'

'What?'

'Collect all the fragments, then rewire a Centauran Matter

Disperser, run them through it backwards, and voila! A

reconstituted signal! What do you think?'

'I think I'm going back to my room. To read. About Paris.'

She left, fed up.

The Doctor started calibrating the scanners, thrilled at the thought of a new puzzle to solve.

It was around the 88th fragment that Romana snapped. She walked

into the console room to find the Doctor racing around the console.

‘Are you still looking for those fragments?’

‘Oh yes! I’m going to collect every single one, and then find out what the message is. Won’t that be exciting? What’s that for?’

He had just noticed the small suitcase on the floor next to her.

‘Clothes. You can drop me off on your way.’

‘You’re not… you’re not leaving, are you?’

For a moment, a look of utter panic crossed his face, before he

banished it quickly. But not quickly enough. Romano smiled.

‘No, of course not. I’m just having a break, while you get this out of your system. I have no intention whatsoever of sitting around while you run around collecting bits and pieces of some old signal that could be who knows how old, or damaged, or anything.’

‘Oh. Good.’

‘Leaving, honestly… As if you’d be able to manage without me.’

‘I’d manage perfectly well without you, thank you very much.

How’d you think I managed before you arrived?’

‘With great difficulty, I should imagine.’

‘I’ve been around for a very long time, young lady.’

‘I know. And if I’d been around, keeping an eye on you, maybe

you wouldn’t have gone through so many regenerations.’

‘That is completely untrue. All right, maybe you’d have helped

out a bit when… now look! I do my own thing, I’m a maverick. A

loner. I don't need anyone to keep an eye on me.'

'Really? I'm going for two weeks. I've calculated that that should be enough time for you to collect the rest of the fragments. If I get back here and you *haven't* been killed, or kidnapped, or broken the TARDIS, or got yourself into some kind of life-threatening

trouble... well, I'll be very surprised.'

'I'll be fine! And when you get back here and see everything's

wonderful, you can take me to the restaurant on Surrifleq 9 to

apologise. And you're paying.'

'Done. And vice versa. If I'm right then *you're* paying.'

'Done.'

'Done!'

'Right!'

'Okay then!'

There was a brief pause. The Doctor twiddled his thumbs.

'So where am I dropping you off?'

The Doctor nearly lost the bet within an hour, when he yanked a

lever off in anger. For a moment, the TARDIS began heading

directly into the path of a sun, with the doors about to open, before he managed to cram a fountain pen into the lever socket and stave off disaster.

'Must get that lever fixed,' he muttered. 'Romana? Ah, yes, of

course.' He looked around, embarrassed, but nobody was there to

see his mistake.

'Well, then.'

The next few days were spent collecting more fragments. The

silence was getting to him, but he refused to admit that he needed Romana around to keep him sane. He'd just got used to things being the way they were, that's all. That's all.

A week into the bet, the Doctor was alarmed to hear a strange voice echoing around the TARDIS corridors. The internal scanners picked up nothing, but there had to be an intruder on board, it was the only explanation. Maybe if he locked himself in one room, and

evacuated all the air from the rest of the TARDIS, that would bring the intruder into the open? It was an excellent plan, with only two flaws: one, the intruder might not need to breathe, and two, he had no idea how to evacuate the air, or even if it could be done. But how to find him, or her, or it, or they? It was a conundrum. Several hours later, the Doctor realised that the 'voices' were his own voice. He'd been talking to himself, out loud, and hadn't realised he was doing it

Later that same day, he did it again. Twice.

A week and half into the bet, he had got used to the fact that he was talking to himself, and decided that it was a sign of intelligence, his own mind insisting on talking things through in the absence of

another sounding board.

All the while, he was collecting more and more fragments.

Another day and he'd have them all. Then all he needed to do was run them backwards through a rewired Centauran Matter Disperser.

The only slight stumbling block now was the fact that he didn't

have a Centauran Matter Disperser, rewired or otherwise.

But he knew a man who knew a man who did.

Unfortunately, the man (the one who did) was the notoriously

violent and bad tempered G'rlanix who, it turned out, had murdered the other man (the one who knew him), who was called Sjad. The

Doctor discovered this when he went to visit Sjad, and found a

smoking crater in the ground where his house (and, indeed, his city) had been.

The Doctor had planned to ask Sjad to convince G'rlanix to lend

him the Centauran Matter Disperser, as Sjad got on quite well with him (or at least he used to, before things clearly took a turn for the worse). The whole smoking crater thing put a severe crimp in that plan. And made things a lot more dangerous.

Now he was going to have to go and see G'rlanix and ask if he

could borrow the Disperser. Without ending up as a smoking crater himself. It was all incredibly dangerous, and a bad idea from start to finish. Which is why the Doctor decided to just steal the Disperser instead.

The plan was to materialise inside G'rlanix's museum right in front of the display case containing the Disperser, open the doors, reach out, grab it, shut the doors, and dematerialise before anyone knew what was happening. There was no way it could go wrong, no way

that anyone could know who did it, or follow him. It was flawless.

But, as most sensible people know, it's the flawless plans that

always go horribly wrong.

The TARDIS materialised inside the museum, as planned, in

front of the display case, as planned. But the Disperser wasn't there.

The Doctor dithered. Should he just go? He was only supposed to

be here for a few seconds, and it had already been thirty seconds now. But he needed that Disperser. Gingerly, he stepped out.

The museum was empty, apart from the exhibits. Lots and lots of

weapons, and a few stuffed animal heads. When the Doctor looked

closer, be corrected himself: lots of weapon cases, and hardly any actual weapons. Most of them had been removed, some by force,

some by unlocking the display cases.

This was not good. Lots of dangerous weapons in the wrong

hands spelled trouble for an intruder. And when it came to these sorts of weapons, pretty much any hands were the wrong hands,

because those hands were usually aiming the weapons at you.

The Doctor ventured further into the complex. He listened

carefully for any sounds of weapons fire but there was nothing. He continued walking into the eerie silence.

He turned a corner, and saw a body lying near a door. There were no visible signs of injury, but some of the most terrible weapons were ones that left no marks on the surface. He crept closer, and 231

saw that the man was holding the Centauran Matter Disperser. The Doctor's eyebrows shot up, and he started to walk forwards.

He stopped himself.

When something looks too good to be true, it usually is. The

nearby door was slightly ajar, maybe half an inch, and some sort of flickering light was coming through the gap. Maybe a viewscreen

on the blink? A broken light fitting? The Doctor didn't know. But for now, there was no noise, so be tried not to worry about it.

He lifted the Disperser out of the hands of the dead man.

'Sorry old chap,' he whispered. He turned to go back the way he

came, but his natural curiosity got the better of him. He had to know what was on the other side of that door.

He edged towards it, and nudged it open with his foot, slowly.

Inside the room, he noticed three things immediately.

The first was that a massive gunfight was taking place, in utter silence, between G'rlanix's guards, and some thieves who had

crashed their ship into the outer shell of the building. Muzzle

flashes from the gunfire flickered wildly.

The second was the dark-green light over the top of the door

which indicated that the room had an electronic soundproofing

system fitted.

The third thing was G'rlanix, mortally wounded, inputting the

code into the self-destruct panel on his computer wall. He hit the confirmation key, and a countdown started on the screen – 3o

seconds. 29... 28...

G'rlanix saw the Doctor, and pointed at him angrily. With a

weapon. He fired.

The blast missed the Doctor, but hit the soundproofing box over

the door, smashing it. Suddenly the full sound and they of the battle came blasting out, snapping the Doctor out of his stunned reverie.

He turned and ran, pursued by G'rlanix.

'It's all right,' shouted the Doctor over his shoulder. 'Don't mind me. Just pretend I'm not here.'

Another blast exploded a bit too close for comfort.

'Really, I was just leaving anyway,' shouted the Doctor.

The Doctor raced back to the TARDIS, clutching the Disperser,

dodging blasts fired by G'rlanix. Luckily, the injured man was

weaving all over the place, had blurred vision in both eyes, and seemed unable to figure out which of the three Doctors to fire at.

All the while, the countdown timer was heading towards zero.

The Doctor leaped inside the open TARDIS doors, and started to

close them. Just then, a lucky shot from G'rlanix slipped through the gap, and blasted a hole in the central console. The doors closed.

The Doctor looked at G'rlanix on the viewscreen, and hesitated. He

switched on the external speakers, and spoke to him.

'Can I give you a lift? No hard feelings, honestly.'

G'rlanix answered by unleashing a volley of gunfire at the

TARDIS doors.

‘Look, I have to go! You’re welcome to come along. I can drop

you off anywhere you like.’

G’rlanix dropped his weapon, and picked up a much larger one.

He aimed it at the TARDIS.

The Doctor’s eyes widened. He quickly started the engines, and

the TARDIS dematerialised.

Back in his museum, G’rlanix roared in anger as the self-destruct countdown reached zero.

The Doctor slumped down, frustrated and out of breath. He looked at the Disperser.

‘You’d better be worth it,’ he muttered. He waved away the

smoke from the hole in the console, inspecting the damage.

‘Not too bad, could be worse I suppose. Better fix it before

Romana gets back, otherwise… I’m talking to myself again. Yes.

Must stop doing that.’ He grabbed his toolbox, and set to work

rewiring the Disperser.

The Doctor picked up Romana on the final day of the bet, making a big show of how he was still alive and the TARDIS was in one

piece. Romana was quite surprised that he even turned up on time, never mind anything else. She had been convinced that he’d be on his next regeneration by now, even in the short time she’d been

away. He must have been extra careful. The Doctor, for his part, was just glad that she didn’t notice the slight burn mark in the side of the console. He’d patched up the hole as best he could, and

hoped that if she did spot it, it wouldn’t be for a while. At which point he would shrug, and insist that it had been there for years.

He spent the rest of the day making the last adjustments to the

Disperser. At last, it was rewired, reconfigured, repurposed. Half of the work was incredibly complex and imaginative, half of it

amounted to snapping bits off and sticking them elsewhere with

chewing gum. But it worked. More or less.

All he needed now was the final fragment, and he could put the

signal together.

The missing piece was on a dusty planetoid with a minimal

atmosphere. Breathable, not very warm, but they wouldn't be there for too long.

'Keep an eye out for those wormholes,' said Romana, before they

left the TARDIS.

'What wormholes?'

'The 27 small wormholes that are drifting around on the surface.

You wouldn't want to get into trouble with one, especially after you've been managing so well.'

'Ah yes, of course.'

The Doctor felt a pang of guilt. But what she didn't know

wouldn't hurt her. As far as she knew, he hadn't got into any

trouble at all. After all, he was alive, wasn't he? And surely that was what mattered, in the great scheme of things.

He set up the Disperser, placing it on a handy rock near to the

glass box. The TARDIS collected the final fragment, sending it into the box. The Doctor switched on the rewired Disperser.

'Right, here we are then. Let's see what you're made of.'

The Disperser jerked into life. The fragments flew out of the box, and were sucked into the open end of the Disperser. When they had all gone in, the device shook, and a solid beam of light came out the

other end. It aimed itself a few feet away, but instead of forming into a message, it formed the shape of a man. The figure was still too bright to see properly.

Seconds later, the light faded, and revealed the man. Curly hair, long coat, scarf, enormous grin – it was the Doctor. Another Doctor.

An exact duplicate.

The original Doctor, crouched over the Disperser, stared in

amazement.

'There you are! Hello!' said the new Doctor, just before turning to Romana with an anxious look. 'Listen, you haven't looked at the sensor logs recently, have you?'

Romana looked at him, temporarily unable to speak. The original

Doctor cleared his throat, trying to regain control of the situation.

'Now look here,' he began, before the new Doctor interrupted

him.

'Sorry, old bean,' he said. 'No time for explanations, but you'll figure it out. Good luck, by the way, you'll be fine. Should be

happening around... now.'

'What should?' asked the original Doctor, a second before a

wormhole that had been hiding behind a nearby rock sucked him

and the Disperser into its vortex.

The Doctor felt like he was falling for a long time, but it must have been only a few seconds. He'd never been sucked through a

mini-wormhole before, and he couldn't honestly say that it was an enjoyable experience. He clung on to the Disperser, bemuse it was the only other solid thing nearby, and felt reassuringly chunky and heavy.

A light approached. For a terrible nanosecond, the Doctor felt as 234

if he was being stretched the entire diameter of the universe, until...

... he came flying out the other end of the wormhole, landing on a soft, sandy beach.

The Disperser landed next to him, just missing his head.

The Doctor let out a loud groan, before checking himself

thoroughly to make sure that nothing was missing, and that his head was on the right way around. Everything seemed more or less

intact. He groaned again. Struggling to his feet, he looked around.

He was on a tiny island in the middle of a vast ocean. He had no idea what planet, what sector, what galaxy, or even if he was in the same universe.

And he had no way of getting back. The wormhole was still there, but it had drastically reduced in size. He could probably just about get his head in, or maybe a leg, but that was no good to anyone.

Besides, who knew where he'd end up? If it was a random

destination then he might be in the same position he was in now. At least here he had air to breathe, and land to stand on. Assuming he ended up somewhere that wasn't fatal, he had no way of contacting anyone to get a lift back to the TARDIS.

Maybe he could send some sort of signal with the Disperser. He

could rewire it back to the way it was, feed some sand or rocks into it, and encode them with a unique signature. Fire them through the wormhole, and... but how would they find him from those signals?

He didn't even know where he was. Unless he was the signal

himself.

Yes, that was it. If he fixed the Disperser, adjusted the settings, fiddled with it a bit, then it could break him down into thousands of tiny pieces, convert them into three-dimensional signal fragments, and...

And there it was. The puzzle was solved. The fragments he had

already been searching for were pieces of himself, sent through a wormhole and scattered across a whole region of the galaxy. The

wormhole must have sent him backwards in time, too, because the

fragments appeared several weeks ago, out of nowhere. That explained how he was able to sense them when they were nearby– because they were part of him.

He sat down, wondering how long it would take to fix the Disperser. He'd been pretty rough with it, and parts were already falling off. A quick search of his pockets revealed several interesting items, the most useful of which were half a jar of marmalade, a broken telescope and a packet of toothpicks.

Tragically, he had completely run out of jelly babies.

The Doctor sat down and looked around, sighing. The island was

so small, he could actually see all the way across it. Three stubby, embarrassed-looking trees skulked here and there, while bleached patches of grass stained the rest of it. No people, no shelter, no help.

He sighed again, then once more for effect.

'Oh well,' he said, to nobody in particular. 'Better get on with it, I suppose. At least I know it'll work.'

Before he started, a thought struck him. What if Romana had looked through the sensor logs? She'd find out all the near misses and accidents he'd had while she was away. He'd lose the bet. He made a mental note to double check with her as soon as he got back.

Technically it was cheating, but he really didn't want to lose the bet.

After all, the restaurant on Surrifleq 9 was very, *very* expensive.

Finally, it was ready. The Doctor got into position and flicked on the Disperser. For a moment, nothing happened, until, with an agonising yank, he was converted into thousands of signal fragments and shot through the wormhole.

And suddenly, he was standing on the dusty planetoid, watching

his old self and Romana gaping at him in amazement. It felt

instantaneous, but he knew that he had been floating around the

galaxy for weeks, in tiny pieces. He stretched, and beamed at his old self.

‘There you are! Hello!’ he said. Now, what was it he was

supposed to remember? Oh yes – the logs... He turned to Romana,

quickly. ‘Listen, you haven’t looked at the sensor logs recently, have you?’

Romana just stared at him. Probably not the best time to have a conversation about this. Another thought struck him. Should he tell his old self what to do, how to get out of the situation? Then again, he figured it out, so maybe he didn’t need to. Besides, there wasn’t really enough time to go into details.

‘Now look here,’ said his old self.

‘Sorry, old bean,’ said the Doctor. ‘No time for explanations, but you’ll figure it out Good luck, by the way, you’ll be fine. Should be happening around... now.’

‘What should?’

The Doctor watched, wincing, as the passing wormhole whisked

his old self away. He turned to Romana, clapping his hands

together.

‘Right! Shall we get on, then?’

‘The signal was you, all along?’

‘Yes. I got taken by the wormhole, and had to send myself as a

signal, to myself, through the same wormhole. And here I am, safe and sound. Good job I collected all those signal fragments, eh?’

‘Yes... but if you hadn’t collected them all, we would never have come here, and you wouldn’t have been taken by the wormhole.’

‘Ah yes, but if I hadn’t been taken by the wormhole, then the

fragments wouldn’t have existed in the first place. And because

they did exist, if I hadn’t come here to create them, then... oh, who knows? That’s the trouble with time paradoxes and recursive loops, Wynn try to make sense of it all you just end up with a blinding headache.’

‘So where did you go?’

‘Long story. Well, actually, not really, but I’ll gladly embellish it for you and make it into one. Come on, I’ll tell you all about it over dinner at Surrifleq 9.’

He strode back towards the TARDIS, followed by Romana. She

smiled. ‘Fair enough. You’re paying, by the way,’ she said.

The Doctor stopped just inside the door.

‘You looked at the sensor logs?’

‘I knew you couldn’t stay out of trouble for five minutes.’

‘It was longer than five minutes!’

‘I won the bet, fair and square. Pay up, and stop being a bad

loser.’

‘I may be a bad loser, but you’re showing no grace in victory.’

‘Would you?’

‘Definitely not. What’s the point of winning if you can’t gloat

about it?’ They walked inside, and the doors shut behind them. The Doctor began to operate the central console. He stopped, and turned to Romana.

‘You didn’t even look at the logs, did you? You didn’t have

time.’

‘Didn’t need to.’

‘That’s cheating!’

‘So is sneakily wiping the sensor logs.’

‘I wouldn’t have done that!’

Romana looked at him, one eyebrow raised. He threw his hands

up in defeat, and pulled a lever.

The TARDIS began to dematerialise, until finally it was gone,

leaving nothing but the sound of the engines fading away into the distance.

With a grinding noise, it reappeared, listing to one side. An

embarrassed cough came from inside, before the Doctor spoke.

‘Ah. Never did get that lever fixed...’

Transmission Ends

Richard Salter

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

Alex sits with his legs crossed, staring at the rain flowing down the window pane. The path of the rivulets is mirrored by the tears

trickling over his cheeks. It has rained continuously for one month now; downstairs is flooded and uninhabitable. Alex’s family, like everyone else in the town of Bambrin, has relocated to the second floor, rescuing everything they can that is not underwater. No

authorities are coming to evacuate them or shore up the flood

defences. Every day the water gets higher, climbing the stairs like an enormous monster stalking them in slow motion. Sandbags slow

it down but won’t keep it out for ever. Alex’s dad is already setting up the attic as their next living space.

A bead of blood escapes Alex’s nostril and mingles with his tears.

You see, Alex is sick. He may be dying. If the hospitals were still operating, his parents might be able to find out what’s wrong with

him. Nobody knows what's causing it.

But Alex knows. He's well aware of what's behind the

headaches, seizures, bleeding, vomiting and blackouts. It's all

George's fault.

A few streets away, something strange is happening. The rain is

avoiding one small area, making room for something oblong that

isn't there yet. The water – up to the shoulders now that the Angon has burst its banks too – is pushed aside to accommodate square

corners. A noise is added to the constant thunder, the sound of the air being torn apart. There's nobody watching, everyone is too busy surviving, but if they were they would witness an astonishing sight.

A box, blue, taller than a man, with a flashing lamp on top, fades into view. You can only see the windows and the roof of course; the rest is immersed in filthy, dark water.

As if that wasn't amazing enough, moments later the box starts to move. It bobs a couple of times and then rolls lazily onto its back, exposing one entire face. It's now like a coffrn floating down the 238

street, if coffins were blue and had 'Police Public Call Box' signs on them.

A door in the box opens now. A head pops out, followed by an

antique umbrella, the kind that goes for thousands at auction. The umbrella opens out and is promptly whipped away by the wind. The stranger seems affronted by this and disappears back inside the box.

A minute goes by and he reappears, this time armed with an oar. He plunges it into the water and begins to paddle, propelling the strange box past rows of flooded houses with candlelight flickering in their upstairs windows. His long hair is already soaked and dishevelled.

His velvet coat is sodden and heavy. His face is drenched and wears a confused expression.

Something is not right.

Alex sees the makeshift boat floating towards his window. Boats

are not uncommon during the day, but rare at night.

The storm is always more dangerous in the dark. What is this man doing? He's coming closer, unable to control his speed.

Moments later, his boat bangs against the outside wall, missing the window by inches and tossing the stranger out into the water. Alex can hear his mum and dad coming but there's no time to lose. He leans out of the window, trying to grab the stranger's hand as he struggles to stay above the waterline. The rain has made the windowsill slick. Alex slips and tries to hold on, but loses his grip.

He plunges head first into the water.

Time slows. Sounds are muted. Alex feels strangely peaceful. At least he is away from George down here; the constant pain that wracks his body has abated. He can swim but the current is very strong. He kicks out for the surface, coughing and spluttering for air as his head breaks above water. He can hear his mum and dad shouting, can see his dad hurriedly tying a rope around his waist.

Something solid and wooden connects with Alex's hand: the blue box! Struggling to grab hold, he finally gains purchase on the sign that says Police. He's not sure how long he can hold on. He thinks: *How ironic would it be if I end up dying from drowning?*

Then he hears a voice, the voice of the stranger. 'Hold on, help is on the way!'

Moments later an arm has closed around him, pulling him out of the water and hoisting him on top of the blue box. He is dimly aware that his dad has removed the rope from his waist and has thrown it to the stranger, who is tying the end around a handle. His parents pull the box back towards the window and tether it there. The stranger hoists Alex into his arms and jumps across to

safety.

239

The stranger accepts a towel proffered by Alex's dad while his mum dries a stunned and bleary Alex.

'Thank you for saving my son,' Alex's dad, Brent, says.

'You're welcome, but the brave lad was trying to save me. He's very courageous I must say. I'm the Doctor.'

'Doctor?' Brent repeats, his voice tinged with hope. 'A medical doctor?'

'Among other things,' the Doctor replies.

'Have you come to help me?' Alex asks eagerly.

'I've come to help everyone,' the Doctor says cryptically. 'But before we get to that, what happened here? Last time I was on Floronia it was a well-populated, civilised, idyllic colony, one of my favourite places for fishing in fact.'

Alex's mum, Elena, asks, 'You're from offworld? Are you with the Federation? Have you come to see how much aid to send?'

'Not exactly.'

Elena doesn't let him finish. 'Because we don't need aid as much as we need the terraformers fixed.'

'This is a terraformed world?'

She nods.

'Oh, I didn't realise that.' The Doctor's expression changes from surprise to disappointment. 'I feel like I just found out my favourite soup contains MSG.'

'The terraformers are on the blink,' Brent explains. 'Hence the

flooding.'

'It's not just flooding either,' Elena adds. 'Tsunamis, droughts, ice storms in the desert, hurricanes, tornadoes. You name it, we're suffering it.'

'And when did this all begin?'

About two months ago,' Elena replies.

'So who runs the terraformers?'

'A company called Weatherant,' Brent explains. 'And they say

they have no idea what's wrong with the satellite grid.'

'Perhaps I can help find the problem.'

Brent shakes his head. 'Weatherant has their best people on it.

They know that system better than anybody. They'll fix it, you'll see.'

Elena tuts and walks off to fetch a bowl of something hot to

warm Alex and their guest. She clearly doesn't share her husband's faith in the company. The Doctor regards Brent for some time with a raised eyebrow, none too convinced himself. Eventually he turns his attention back to Alex. 'So,' he says, tell me about your

problem.'

* * *

240

Take a step back from this scene. At this moment on the continent of New Rasia, a fifty-foot tsunami has just obliterated the coastal city of Chimarenta. A thousand miles away, a popular tourist

destination called Miniaron is being flattened by 200-mile-an-hour winds. A little closer to Alex's house, the city of Portent has been brought to its knees by freezing conditions that turn water instantly to ice and render anything mechanical useless. Thousands are dying right now because heating systems simply cannot cope with such

extreme cold, plunging homes into the depths of cold hell. After the

first month, 400,000 people were dead as a direct result of extreme weather. Nobody is keeping track of the death toll any more. The media has all but ceased to operate. Societies are at breaking point.

People are just trying to survive. Alex's town of Bambrin is

relatively lucky. Rain and flooding are all they have to contend with, for the time being.

And far above the planet's surface, repair crews attempt to reach the terraformers in space shuttles, but something prevents them

from getting dose enough even to assess the damage.

Nobody knows what that something is. Nobody except Alex.

'He talks to me. He shows me things.'

Back at Alex's house, the Doctor is intrigued. He places his

fingers beneath Alex's jawbone and asks him to stick out his

tongue.

'Who talks to you?'

Alex replies with his tongue still sticking out. 'The alien. The monster.' Elena smiles at the Doctor. 'He has quite the

imagination,' she says. Alex rolls his eyes.

'The alien you call George,' the Doctor says. 'Is he causing the environmental problems?'

'Of course!'

The Doctor shines a light into Alex's eyes and frowns. Alex feels a gentle prodding in his mind.

'Are you telepathic?' the Doctor asks.

Alex just blinks at him. 'I can't read minds, if that's what you mean?' Elena smiles and busies herself with preparing a bed for the Doctor. She assumes their mysterious visitor is playing with her son, but Alex has been patronised by adults enough to know he is deadly serious.

'Interesting,' the Doctor says. 'So what does George show you?'

‘My memories. He shows me scenes from my life. I don’t know why.’

‘Are you sure you’re not just remembering things spontaneously? Something’s affected your brain, that’s for certain. Maybe the

changes in your physiology are causing you to relive past events.’

Elena looks concerned at this. ‘Changes? What changes?’

The Doctor perches himself on the edge of a desk and pinches his bottom lip between thumb and forefinger. ‘I’m not sure, but it would explain the symptoms.’

‘Is it...?’ Elena pauses, unsure of how to say it in front of her son.

Alex sighs. ‘Mum wants to know if it’s going to kill me,’ he says.

‘Alex!’ Elena protests.

‘Mum, I’m thirteen years old. I know I’m sick and I know it’s serious. Isn’t it, Doctor?’

The Doctor doesn’t reply. His eyes glaze over. He doesn’t seem to be all there. If you take a moment to study his face, there is just the merest twitch at the corner of his mouth. Then he collapses.

<<The Disperser in pieces at my feet. My scarf wrapped around the barrel of the weapon, holding it in place. The sonic screwdriver clamped between my teeth as I try to insert tab A into slot B. The waves lap against the shore. The sand creeps into my boots. I blow more of the fine dust from the intricate mechanism I’ve exposed.

This is not the ideal environment in which to be executing precise recalibrations of complex matter dispersal equipment.

But I have no choice. If I want to see Roman, K-9 and the TARDIS again, I have to keep working. I’m hungry but that never stops me. Just for a moment, I let my thoughts drift to the restaurant

on Surrifieq 9 and their very fine truffle-studded diver scallops. Just for a moment, and then back to work. > >

When the Doctor comes to, he feels like his brain is on fire. The morning light flooding the room hurts so much that closing his eyes is not enough to shut out the pain. He resorts to covering his head with a pillow.

Alex and his parents enter the room. They all look worried. They don't say anything, just stand there looking at the Doctor like he has three heads and a tail. They don't ask him what happened and he

finds this both fascinating and worrying. Then he realises why.

'What happened to me, happens to Alex. Am I right?'

All three of them nod.

The Doctor stands on the roof, watching a few boats pass by in the rare morning sunlight and ignoring the stares of other people who are also sitting on their roofs, waiting to be rescued. They all wonder if he is from the Federation, no doubt. The Doctor doesn't acknowledge them, nor does he turn up his nose at the stench from the contaminants in the water: petrol, chemicals, human waste,

rotting corpses. His headache has receded to a dull background

throbbing now. He wipes away a fresh trickle of blood from his

nose and turns to see Alex clambering onto the roof behind him.

'I'm guessing your parents wouldn't approve of you coming up

here on your own,' the Doctor comments gently.

'I'm not on my own,' Alex argues. 'I'm with you.'

'So tell me, Alex, are there many telepaths on this planet?'

'I don't think so.'

'My guess,' the Doctor whispers to him, though nobody else

could possibly hear their conversation unless they shout, 'is that you and I are the only living beings on this world who possess an innate

telepathic ability.'

'But I told you, I can't read minds.'

'Neither can I. But that's an extreme form of telepathy. At its

most basic level, it means your mind is open to communicating with beings who do not use speech to talk to each other.'

'Do such beings exist?'

'Oh yes. I travelled with one once. Very hard to surprise her on her birthday.'

Alex giggles. 'You're silly.'

'Yes, yes I am.' And with that, the Doctor falls off the roof.

<<I am the last to enter the basement and I slam the door behind me. Almost immediately I can hear many hands on the other side of the door, scrabbling and scratching, trying to get it open.

'Nyssa, the outer door. Barricade it quickly!'

Nyssa moves to comply, Mr Chalmers helping her. Meanwhile I

dislodge a plank of wood nailed above the door frame and jam it

under the handle. It won't hold them for long but it's better than nothing. Tegan is sheltering Chalmers' young son with her arms.

Mrs Chalmers didn't make it.

'Quickly, we don't have much time,' I say, dashing down the

steps to the basement floor. 'Mr Chalmers, I need to know if you have Epsom salts, bleach and lemon juice in the house.'

Chalmers thinks about this for a moment 'In the kitchen I think.'

'Good.' Tegan and Nyssa regard me oddly but I ignore them. 'Now, how are we going to get to the kitchen?'

'What are you doing, Doctor?' Tegan asks.

'Saving Mallard Close, and probably the world while I'm at it. I do it much better when there are no interruptions.'>>

The Doctor awakes inside the house, soaking wet once more. He

coughs the polluted water from his strained lungs and struggles to sit up, his head now feeling like an elephant has sat on it

‘And I thought the psychospoor was painful,’ he said.

243

Alex hands him another towel. ‘It happened again?’

The Doctor nods, instantly regretting the move. ‘When Bob

Hoskins said, “It’s good to talk”, he’d clearly never met George.’

While Elena heats a couple of cans of soup over a camping stove, the Doctor explains to the family that George is not a figment of Alex’s imagination.

‘Far from it I believe he’s very real. His name may not actually be George, but it’ll do for the time being.’

‘What is he?’

‘I have no idea, but he seems to communicate telepathically,

specifically by showing a person a memory from their own life that has some relevance to what he’s trying to say. So far I’ve seen two memories, one indicating that George is trapped somewhere, and

the other showing me how I have a habit of fixing things. At least that’s my interpretation. I think he’s asking for my help to set him free.’

‘Why you? Why me?’ Alex asks. Is this the telepathy thing?’

‘Yes. But my goodness does it hurt. I think because we are not of the same species as George, we aren’t completely in tune with him so he has to force the images into our minds.’

Elena serves the soup. Her tone is incredulous. ‘George isn’t

real.’

‘Oh he’s real all right. I can feel him. It may be my memories I’m seeing, but I certainly didn’t choose them.’

‘I felt the same thing!’ Alex shouts excitedly.

‘And this George,’ Brent says, his tone sceptical. ‘Is he killing my son?’

‘I’m amazed he’s survived this long.’

The Doctor sits in silence for about half an hour. He is trying to build some mental barriers to lessen the impact of George’s

communications. Alex watches him in fascination. He feels a surge of relief that someone so clever – a doctor no less – has validated his claims. Since the Doctor arrived, Alex has felt much better.

Before he went into his trance, the Doctor guessed that the creature had been frustrated with Alex’s limited age and lack of personal history to draw upon. Once the Doctor arrived, George switched his attention to the man with a millennium of memories –a rich hotbed of communication possibilities. Alex doesn’t know quite what he

means by that. Nobody has a thousand years of memories. Do they?

I’m ready for you. You took me by surprise before, but I think I’ve tuned to your wavelength now. I’m the Doctor, I’m here to help. What are you?

244

<<With the information in the book lying open across one face of the console and some nifty modifications to the TARDIS’s receiver circuits, I’ve managed to lock on directly to the SOS signal coming from the ship. I really am heading for the end of time.

It takes a while to get there – it’s a long way to go. Eventually the central column stops moving indicating that I’ve arrived. I grab my coat and hat, slip them on and open the doors.>>

Well I’m sure I’ll work out why you’re showing me that particular memory eventually. Let me think. You’re responding to an SOS? You think you’re trapped at the end of time? You enjoy wearing cricket outfits?

Do you understand me? Hopefully the TARDIS is translating my words into something you can understand.

It still hurts, you know? It may not incapacitate me, but I can feel the damage you’re doing. You’re killing the boy when you talk to him.

<<The ends of Catra’s mind flap about in the void like the tentacles of a sea anemone undulating in a strong current. Disconnected and

alone, her very being is at risk of being lost. I move closer, frying to mentally grab hold of as many tendrils as I can. If I can unify the threads of her consciousness into one stream then I can

communicate with her. If I can't, she'll be lost for ever.

I manage to hold her together with a supreme effort of will, but I know it will not last for long. Enough to say goodbye, perhaps, and then... oblivion. I cannot save her. > >

So you do understand what you're doing to Alex Yet you carry on doing it. Where are you?

< <I stand and watch, leaning on my umbrella as the huge warships arrive in orbit, big enough to see clearly from the surface. Planetary Conversions have sent fourteen of their finest warships – probably overkill given the level of resistance they are going to encounter.

Still, I'm sure it makes for good advertising. > >

OK so you're in orbit. Why can't anyone see you?

< <It really was quite bemusing. The man had clearly been attacked by someone or something, I hadn't arrived in time to see which, and yet nobody had batted an eyelid. People not trying to help I can understand, sad though it makes me. But not even to notice? Peri is convinced it was a beast, though I have my doubts. She couldn't see it either, already affected by something in this environment.

Whatever it is, it isn't affecting me. Of course, I have a vastly superior mind. > >

You're being censored? No, that's not what you're trying to tell me.

You're trying to say that while you have physical presence, the people of this world cannot perceive you, right? I wonder why that should be.

< <Poor Bernice hangs suspended by the vines, closing around her throat. I move to help but I'm caught fast by another tendril around my leg. I swat at it but its grip is strong. Over at the console, Larkspur hesitates, unsure of what to do. > >

You're entangled in something, and you're in orbit. The terraformer network, perhaps? How did that happen?

< <I reach out a hand but the large-headed alien just stares blankly at it. Never mind. I simply introduce myself with a smile.

'My name is Ekode Blath Negen Mar Regen Blen Parthimi. I am

the appointed representative of the Kubthukiau Aesthetic. We have decided to assist you, Doctor.'

'Splendid!' I say. 'Well not a moment to lose.'

'I hoped you would come alone.'

I glance at the Marines behind me. 'Yes I'm sorry about them.

Insisted on coming.'

'They are armed.'

I feign surprise. 'Are they? Yes, so they are. Is that a problem?'

'It offends me,' Ekode says.

'Yes it offends me too. Unfortunately humans have a tendency to

rely on guns. There's no way they'll leave them behind.'

Ekode scratched his enormous temple. 'It is of no matter. I

disabled their weapons.'

'Did you? Ah yes, your amazing ability to psychically control

technology. Very impressive. Shall we head to the transmat then?' > >
I see, I think. So, like the Kubthukians, your people interface directly with your technology rather than using any kind of external interface.

I'd imagine when you tried to connect with the terraformer network, you ended up entangled. But why were you trying to gain control of the satellites?

My my, this hurts. My trance helps, but I can feel my neural receptors misfiring like there's no tomorrow. I'm going to try to help you, but you must stay still. The more you thrash about trying to escape, the more damage you do. I have to wake up now otherwise I may never wake again. I will be back.

Alex watches the Doctor with concern as his eyes flicker open. He

looks like he's trying to rise from the bedroom floor but his arms and legs move in a jerky, uncoordinated manner.

'Are you all right?' Alex asks.

'Fine thank you, Susan.' The Doctor blinks. 'Can you help me

up?' he asks. It takes some effort, but eventually the Doctor is standing upright. 'I've not had a headache like this since that all-nighter in Paris with Ernest.'

Alex has no idea what he's talking about, but understands that the Doctor is in pain. He helps him to the chair in the corner and then fetches a glass of water. The Doctor drains it in one shot.

'You spoke to George, didn't you?' Alex asks.

'Yes. Interesting method of communication. Shame it has to take

a sledgehammer to the brain in order to get its message across, but still. Fascinating.'

Alex laughs at this. 'Is he trapped?'

'I think so, yes. Tell me, Alex, have Weatherant tried to reboot the terraformer satellites?'

Alex nods. 'There was a news report on it, before the power went out. They couldn't do it from the surface so they sent shuttles to the orbital control station. They couldn't get near for some reason.'

'George?'

'I think so, yes. He scares me, Doctor.'

'Because of the pain he causes when he talks to you?'

'Not just that. There's something else.'

The Doctor raises an eyebrow. 'Oh?'

'When I was eight I was beaten up by a bully called Tom at

school. He was kicking me in the stomach over and over while I

was on the ground. I asked him to stop but he said he didn't care and just carried on until a teacher pulled him off me. I hadn't done anything to him, he just lashed out at me and didn't care that he was causing me pain.'

'Why are you telling me this?' the Doctor asks, but Alex can see in his eyes he already knows why.

'George showed me that memory, Doctor. George is hurting me

and I don't think he cares.'

The next day, the Doctor has recovered sufficiently to outline his plan to Alex's family. He will take his TARDIS to the orbiting

control station. There he will reboot the terraformer network,

allowing George to break free.

'Good luck with that,' Brent comments.

'You think I'll fail?' the Doctor asks.

'There were big delays with the terraforming project originally.

Weatherant couldn't get their satellite network online. Looked like sabotage. They kept trying new satellite formations and eventually all the problems stopped for good. The network came online and the rest is history. From what I've heard, nobody has dared reboot it 247

since in case it won't come back.'

'I don't see that we have any choice, do you?' the Doctor

responded.

'Can I come with you?' Alex asks suddenly.

'Definitely not!' the Doctor snaps. 'It's far too dangerous.'

His father concurs. 'You're too sick to travel.'

'But Dad, if the Doctor can't take the strain of talking to George long enough to get him free, I'm the only one who he can talk to instead.'

Brent flat-out refuses, but the Doctor is pondering Alex's words.

‘I hate to say it, but Alex is right’

His father protests more strongly, but Elena cuts him off. ‘You

go, Alex. Go with the Doctor.’

‘Elena, what are you saying?’ Brent protests.

There are tears in her eyes as she speaks. ‘Alex knows he doesn’t have long. He’s brave and he’s strong, and the Doctor needs his

help.’

Alex is overcome with emotion. He has never loved his mother

more. His dad falls silent.

‘It’s settled then,’ the Doctor says, sombrely.

The inside of the Doctor’s machine is a wonder to behold, but the real thrill for Alex is stepping outside onto the cold metal floor of the orbiting control station. Possibilities crowd into his head like rush-hour passengers in a train carriage. If the TARDIS belonged to Alex, he could rescue his family from Floronia and take them

somewhere safe to live. Why stop there? Alex guessed they could

fit everyone in Bambrin inside and save them all. Perhaps Alex

could make a few return trips, plucking survivors from the jaws of death before some climate disaster claims them. He would be a

hero, saving millions from certain death. He stares at the Doctor in awe. Such power at his fingertips. The man is clearly a genius and his courage seems never to falter. The TARDIS alone makes him

special. The things he must have seen. The places he must have

gone. The things he could do. If Alex owned the TARDIS, he

wouldn’t need a house. He could live in this blue box, go wherever he pleased. Maybe he could find someone to cure his ailment.

Perhaps the Doctor...

‘I can’t save you, you know,’ the Doctor told him.

‘I was hoping…’

‘I know. Your parents were too, which is why I’m telling you and not them. I don’t think they could handle the truth. But you are something special. I think you’ve come to terms with what’s

happened to you.’

248

Alex hopped onto a chair and swung his legs back and forth. ‘It’s not fair, Doctor. I want to live. I want to see things. I want to travel with you and see the universe. There must be so many wonderful

things to see!’

‘Oh there are, there are. Wait a minute.’

The Doctor grabs a swivel chair and wheels it over, dropping

himself into it so that he faces Alex. ‘This satellite array acts as a sort of neural network,’ he explains.

‘A what?’

‘It’s like a thinking system. It displays intelligence.’

‘Like it’s alive?’

‘Yes, except it’s not really. It just appears that way. I think our friend George got confused, mistaking the network for someone

else.’

‘That’s how he got tangled up?’

The Doctor nods. ‘It seems George was expecting to find others

of his kind on this world.’

‘So are you going to reboot the network?’

‘In a minute. First I’m going to use it for something.’

‘For what?’ Alex asks, but he can’t tell if he says the words out loud or not. His mind is filled with images. The Doctor and a

woman called Bazima, inside his TARDIS. It is one of the Doctor’s

memories; he is sharing it with Alex.

< <Metebelis III... Valdamen... Earth... Katonsis... Raag... Such amazing places. I show each one to Bazima, and although she

seems to drink in the sights her underlying melancholy does not

dissipate.

I save the best for last. I take her to Valdamar IV. Stepping out into the middle of a busy city, I am about to tell her that this is the figure for her people, that they survive and flourish and colonise other worlds, all because of what she is doing. I open my mouth to speak.

'These people seem so alien,' Bazima comments suddenly.

I close my mouth.

'I mean, they look human, but they're different It's creepy. Can we go somewhere else instead?'

I don't say a word. I turn around and walk back into the

TARDIS. > >

Alex opens his eyes, filled with euphoria. He has seen such amazing things, witnessed the universe through the Doctor's eyes. It was sheer joy to behold. 'Who is Bazima?' he asks. 'She's nice, but

sad.'

'She's a friend I caught up with recently.' He changes the subject

'Did you enjoy your tour?'

Alex nodded, tears in his eyes. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Perhaps, if there's time, I can show you all

those places for real. And don't thank me, thank Weatherant for

building a satellite network that amplifies telepathic ability.'

'Did they do that deliberately?'

'I doubt it. I suspect they tried many different configurations until

they struck upon one that made the problems go away.'

'Is it time to set George free?'

'It's time.'

Stay calm, it's me again. I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help. I think I know how to release you from the terraforming satellites but you have to be ready for my signal. I'm starting to shut down the network.

Warning lights flicker like a carnival ride on every control panel Alex can see.

'George is panicking,' the Doctor yells above the deafening

klaxon, fingers working at least six different controls at once. 'We need to calm him down before he wrecks everything.'

'Can we play him music?' Alex asks. 'Music always calms me

down.'

The Doctor turns to Alex with a grin. 'What a marvellous idea.'

<<My shoes are lettin' water in

And soakin' up my feet.

Ain't got no home to go to Co.

I'm living on the street.

I broke into a church that night

And prayed there to the Lord

Ain't got no home to go to

And I'm plainly bein' ignored.

So if you have a direct line

To the man who lives upstairs

Tell him I've no home to go to

And it seems like no one cares.>>

One by one, the lights go off. The klaxon falls silent. Alex is thrilled that his idea worked. He can hear the music in his own head as the Doctor broadcasts his memory to George.

Good, so I can show you my memories as well. Interesting. Maybe that will make my talking to you a little more comprehensible. Stay 250

calm now, listen to Ronnie... Now, the system reboot won't hurt you as long as you do as I tell you. I'm going to guide you out using my TARDIS. You need to follow me, but it's not easy. My ship travels the vortex, so you need to ride its coat tails and then you'll be free. Let me show you something that might help.

<<The tune I improvise on my recorder is suitably upbeat and stirring. Raysa moves before me like a woman possessed, twisting in impossible directions this way and that as she traverses the road.

My goodness this is exciting, a new experience for me. I gaze about in wonder, almost forgetting to play for a moment...>>

Alex watches as the system powers down. 'Stay here,' says the

Doctor, 'and make sure these three lights go off. Wait for ten

minutes, and then press those two buttons. You must wait ten

minutes, understand?'

'I understand, Doctor. Go!'

The Doctor rushes to his TARDIS. There is an astonishing sound,

like the air being ripped to shreds, and he is gone.

Follow me. Come on, George! Dance along the Blue Road like I showed you. Stay with me now. Yes that's it! You're nearly free. I'll see you on the other side. I want to show you something...

<<The Doctor sits on the beach, lazily dragging a hand through the sand. Alex sits a little way away, enjoying the sea breeze but

keeping his distance from Emily. The little girl stops filling her bucket and gazes up the Doctor, shading her eyes from the bright sunlight.

'Why am I a human girl?'

'This was the first place I thought of,' the Doctor replies. 'I

wanted to talk to you using my way of communicating, so I brought you here.'

'And where is here?' Emily stands up, letting the contents spill from her bucket as she drops it on the sand.

'Inside a computer,' the Doctor replies. 'Well, more specifically, inside my memory of the inside of a computer. It was designed to allow humans to talk to other species. It seemed an appropriate

place to come. I wasn't inside for long, just enough to know that Mel would be safe when I connected her up.'

'I do not know what you are talking about. This method of

communication is primitive and imprecise. The words confuse me.'

'That's funny, because I feel much the same way about your way

of communicating. Plus this hurts a lot less. I think you may have done serious damage to the TARDIS translation circuits. And my

mind too. Poor Alex will never recover either.'

'It is none of my concern. I am free now. I must leave this

computer.'> >

Stop! Where are you going? No, no, no, no! I wasn't done talking.'

don't know how much more of your regular conversation I can take.

< <I believe you have a message for Sasha.'

Peter turns to me, his eyes imploring. 'Yes, but in your amazing box, could you not relay it faster?'

'I'm sorry but no. One of the Rutans escaped the explosion – I

have to get after him. Sasha will carry the message.'

'Very well. Where am Ito meet him?'

'The train station, tomorrow morning. He'll be boarding the

trans-Siberian with my two companions. I've asked him to keep an eye

on them. This way he'll be killing two birds with one stone.'

'That is most fortuitous, Doctor,' Peter comments.

'Yes,' I reply with a wry smile. 'Isn't it just?' > >

I feel a pang of guilt for what happened to Peter and to dear Sasha.

They knew the risks, but I effectively sent them both to their deaths.

Mustn't get distracted. Too late! My trance is failing. That last transmission from George was very strong. I should really clean up the blood on the console before it leaves a stain. So what are you trying to tell me, hmm? I led you outside the satellites' orbit. You know you will become tangled again if you try to approach. And since you can't get in, it seems like you want me to relay a message for you.

But to whom?

< <'Young man, could you help me?'

I wave my cane at the postman outside the sorting office as he

empties the contents of the box into a grey sack.

He pauses and looks up. If he is irritated by the interruption he has the good grace not to show it.

'What can I do for you, Sir?'

'Thank you, my dear fellow, most agreeable of you. I'm looking

for someone. His name is Sam and I believe he works in this

building.'

The postman wracks his brains for a moment and then responds,

'You mean Sam Wentworth? Yeah, he works in the Dead Letter

Office.'

'Can you direct me there?'

'Well, it's off limits to the public.'

I chuckle. 'Of course, of course. I don't intend to set one foot inside that office, my dear boy. I just wish to know where to ask for 252

him.'

'OK, well I can take you there if you like.'

'That would be splendid! Quite splendid.'> >

Enough! Ow, I get it. You can stop. You're like the postman. You deliver messages – it's your job.

< <It doesn't take too much effort to break out of my cell but I'm not planning an escape. This prison is really a hastily converted

research laboratory, and I have some very important research to

carry out. With the help of an electron microscope in the lab

neighbouring my cell, I examine the DNA sample on my

handkerchief and find the shadow quickly. It is quite fascinating.

It's a shame Sarah isn't here so I can show her what I've found and explain what it means.

The oldest message, the instructions on how to build the Egg, are the clearest. Easy to miss if you don't know they're there, but once you spot them they stand out like a Venusian Aikido instructor in a nunnery.

Alongside them is something very intriguing. It's partially

obscured by mutations, but it appears to be an accompanying

invitation explaining the function of the Egg. Of course, I'd already worked it out but it's nice to have my theories confirmed.

What's really interesting is that this ancient manipulation of

genetic code has inspired a whole host of imitators. The invitation itself is obscured not by natural mutation, but by mare messages.

Secret wartime transmissions on top of subtle changes to eye

colour, beside a long dormant code that when activated could

subjugate this entire race! I don't think it's ever been tripped, but I make a mental note to find out who wrote that message and stop

their invasion plans. None of this except the Egg and the invitation is relevant to these people of course, but ifs fascinating nonetheless.

Somebody is corning! I turn off the machines and move swiftly to the door. I am not ready to tip my hand just yet. > >

Please stop! What was that about? A message has been genetically encoded into your genes? Is that what you're trying to..? Oh wait, I see! Yes, you yourself are genetically engineered to deliver messages, is that what you're saying? Built for speed I would imagine. Postman is not your job then, ifs your purpose. It's all you exist for. How interesting. But whoever you were trying to deliver your message to didn't answer. The only one who could hear you was Alex. Am I right?

< <i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am 253

lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i > >

Yes I understand. Please stop, you're killing me. Alex, can you hear me?

The Doctor's voice is loud and clear inside Alex's mind.

'I hear you,' he replies.

Good, it's important you hear everything George and I say to each other, because if talking to him kills me you may need to act to save Floronia

'Don't say that, Doctor! You can't die!'

What I'm about to do is very dangerous. I have no idea if I'll survive, but you must see what I see and live to act upon what I find out. You're a very brave young man, Alex. I have faith in you.

There are tears in Alex's eyes. 'OK, I will try.'

Good lad. Here I go.

A burst of brilliant colour fills Alex's consciousness, so bright it hurts his mind's eye. It's a peculiar feeling, painful but captivating.

Alex knows he is seeing what the Doctor is experiencing firsthand, so heaven knows how agonising this must be for him.

With a start Alex realises he is inside George's mind. The Doctor has learnt to communicate with George in the same way George has been

communicating with the two of them. He is searching through George's mind on the pretence of finding relevant memories to

convey his side of a conversation. Actually he's taking the

opportunity to look for answers.

Alex sees a faraway world, George's home. George is there, with

more of his kind who are not messengers. He is telling his fellows of others in danger who need help. Moving forward to a more

recent memory: George surging through space, leaving his fellows from the distant homeworld far behind him.

Flash further back to a different memory, that of George here on Floronia! Alex recognises Jargh Rock, a unique formation on the

other side of the world from Bambrin. But there is no city of

Candiama nearby. In its place is a small settlement of a hundred or so prefab shelters. George is talking with other members of his race.

There are no words to hear, instead they show each other memories to convey meaning but Alex cannot work out what they are saying.

Soon after that, Alex sees the terraformer satellites changing

formation. To George they are like a kaleidoscope of colour,

shifting in space. George can pass through it on the way out, but now they finally get the alignment right and the colours snap into focus. It's a machine, an intelligent machine, like the ones that 254

George's people use! Have the humans created a war machine in

space to fight George's kind? Whatever it is, he can no longer hear his people on the surface, nor can he return to them. He must go home as fast as he can.

Two months ago. George returns to Floronia. The machine in

orbit still blocks his view of the surface; he cannot see if any of his people survive. He must make contact with the intelligent machine, try to shut it down. An appendage of thought twists around a section of the network and George realises he is ensnared. In panic,

struggling to break free, George grows more entangled with each

passing moment. Soon he knows he cannot escape. Ironically, as a result of his struggling, the network is now misaligned and he can see the surface.

There's only one voice he can hear: one small voice.

Alex separates himself from the imagery with a start.

George was sent here with a message, the Doctor says in Alex's mind. *He sounds very weak. I don't know what the message is. I do know who it's intended for. George's people colonised Floronia first, before humans arrived. Because you can't see his kind, you destroyed his people with your terraforming. They tried to fight back by attacking your terraformers, but eventually Weatherant managed to align the satellites in such a way that they created a telepathic field, disrupting their ability to communicate and effectively sealing them off from the outside universe. It seems it was a complete accident.*

'Are they all dead, Doctor? George's people I mean.'

The ones on Floronia, I think so yes.

Alex has full access to George's memories now. He selects one, a memory of George – filled with remorse at conveying the wrong

message on his very first interstellar transmission. Alex shows the memory to George, hoping to convey his apologies for what

happened to his people.

Alex hears a trickling sound and wonders what it is. Looking

down, he sees blood pooling on the control panel he is leaning on.

The pool widens, obscuring the Weatherant logo.

Alex's mind *screams*!

Weak now, barely able to stand, the Doctor sets course for the

orbiting control station. He felt Alex's message of regret sent to George. Noble but unwise. George is trying to respond, and now the Doctor sees nothing but blinding pain in the boy's head. The

satellites' telepathic network allows the Doctor to take on some of

Alex's pain so he can regain consciousness.

255

Alex, concentrate on your family, shut out George's attempts to talk to you.

The toll on the Doctor is heavy. He can feel the tingle of oncoming regeneration. His foray into George's memories has revealed many answers but has shattered his own mind. One more communication will finish this body for sure, and possibly this Time Lord for good.

And he knows one more communication is still to come. George must deliver his message; it is what he was born to do. It's in his programming. If Alex's concentration slips before the Doctor's, the boy will be the recipient and it will kill him instead. The Doctor can't let that happen.

Alex, I'm coming back. Keep concentrating. Don't let George in.

When I get there I will send you to sleep, just for a while, so that you are safe. Hold on a little longer.

Alex hears the roaring and grinding of the TARDIS returning. He looks up groggily, wiping blood from his face. The amazing man who has saved Alex's world from disaster appears in the doorway.

He steps out of the box, his shoe clanging against the metal floor.

And then he collapses.

Alex runs to his side but the Doctor is unconscious.

He knows what he must do. George will not stop until he delivers his message, and if he gets entangled in the grid again... This must end now.

Alex opens his mind.

The street has now drained of most of the standing water, leaving behind a sodden mess of debris: corpses, oil slicks, chemicals,

rubbish, twisted metal; all of it strewn about. The stench is worse now than when the water was here.

But for the people emerging from their homes for the first time in a month, the mood is victorious. Someone with a radio hears the

first broadcast in weeks from the capital. The storms have abated.

The winds have died down. The rains have stopped. The planet is

righting itself.

An impromptu celebration begins. Emotions explode onto the

street, pent up for so long and now free at last. Rebuilding can wait until tomorrow. For now, they are happy to be alive.

Nobody hears the TARDIS arrive. Nobody notices the Doctor

emerge and walk solemnly down the street between the revellers,

nor the bloodstains on his shirt. Nobody takes any notice of the body in his arms, just one more casualty who will be mourned

properly at some point, but not today.

Nobody notices that is, except the boy's parents.

There are tears, there is anguish. There is even fury from Brent at the Doctor for letting this happen.

Elena calms her distraught husband enough to hear the Doctor's

words.

The Doctor hands over the body. 'He's one of the bravest young

men I've ever met,' he says. 'Don't let him die in vain.'

'What do you mean, Doctor?' Elena asks.

'When you first came to this world, these creatures were

unprepared and you wiped them out by mistake. Next time they will be ready. George is gone, and I will do what I can, but you need to leave this planet and soon. It's not safe for any of you here.'

And he tells them the final message Alex received before he died.

<<I'm not sure how long I can hold on. How ironic would it be if I end up dying from drowning?

Then I hear a voice, the voice of the stranger. 'Hold on, help is on the way!'>>

About the Authors

DAN ABNETT is a novelist and award-winning comic-book

writer. He has written 25 novels for the Black Library, including the acclaimed *Gaunt's Ghosts* series and the *Eisenhorn* trilogy. His Black Library novel *Horns Rising* and his Torchwood novel *Border Princes* (for BBC books) were both bestsellers. As a writer of comics, he has worked for all the major publishers, on everything from the *Mr Men* to the *X-Men*. He created the popular series *Sinister Dexter* for *2000 AD*, and is currently scripting *Superman* for DC Comics, and the acclaimed *Nova* for Marvel. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent. His website is www.danabnett.com

LOU ANDERS is the editorial director of Prornetheus Books'

science fiction imprint Pyr, www.pyrsf.com). A 2008 and 2007

Hugo Award nominee, a 2007 Chesley Award nominee, and a 2006

World Fantasy Award nominee, he is also the editor of the

anthologies *Outside the Box* (Wildside Press, 2001), *Live Without a Net* (Roc, July 2003), *Projections: Science Fiction in Literature & Film* (MonkeyBrain, December 2004), *FutureShocks* (Roc, January 2006), *Fast Forward 1* (Pyr, February 2007), *Sideways in Crime* (Solaris, June 2008) and *Fast Forward 2* (Pyr, October 2008). In 2000, he served as the Executive Editor of Bookface.com, and

before that he worked as the Los Angeles Liaison for Titan

Publishing Group. He is the author of *The Making of Star Trek: First Contact* (Titan Books, 1996), and has published over 500

articles in such magazines as *The Believer*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Dreamwatch*, *Star Trek Monthly*, *Star Wars Monthly*, *Babylon 5*

Magazine, *Sci Fi Universe*, *Doctor Who Magazine* and *Manga Max*.

His articles and stories have been translated into Danish, Greek, German, Italian, Spanish and French and have appeared online at

SFSite.com, RevolutionSF.comn and InfinityPlus.co.uk. Visit him

online at www.louanders.com. **Author's Note:** Way back in 1994, Richard Salter was kind enough to invite me to co-edit a proposed anthology for the then-existing Virgin books line of *Doctor Who Decalogs*. Alas, the book never happened, but all the *Doctor Who* authors I met as a result eventually led to my being sent by the now 258

defunct magazine Sci Fi Universe to cover a small convention in

Irvine, California. There, I met Jean-Marc Lofficier, then attached to the Fox TV *Doctor Who* movie, who recommended me to Titan Publishing, who were themselves looking for an LA Liaison to

cover Sci Fi TV for their various licensed magazines. This led to five years of journalism in Los Angeles hanging out in television studios and writing about *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*, which led me through a round about way into the science fiction publishing field, and my current gig as Editorial Director of the Pyr science fiction and fantasy book line. So in a sense, I owe it all to Rich for not telling me to get lost when I came knocking on the doors of his

anthology proposal! Therefore, it is a singular honour to finally be in an anthology with him, a journey at full circle just 54 years after he first invited me to do so. Thanks, Rich!

GRAEME BURK is a writer who lives in Toronto. He is the author of two other *Short Trips* stories, 'Turnabout Is Fair Play' (*Short Trips and Side Steps*, 2000) and 'Reversal of Fortune' (*Short Trips: Steel Skies*, 2003). Since 2000 he has been editor of *Enlightenment*, the fanzine of Doctor Who Information Network, North America's

oldest and largest Doctor Who fan club (www.dwin.org). He is

currently working on a book for Mad Norwegian Press. A finalist

for a new screenwriters prize with the Writers Guild of Canada, he dwells in the shadowlands on the outer circles of development hell.

KELLY HALE lives in the beautiful Pacific Northwest in a little place

called Stumptown USA, famous for streets paved with coffee beans and garbage that recycles itself. She's published novels, short stories, and plays, and was thrilled to be included in this anthology.

She loves the Doctor like the super-smart alien son she never had –

which annoys her merely average alien son quite a lot.

MAGS L HALLIDAY has climbed over the roofs of Hampton

Court Palace and St Paul's Cathedral, and can get herself lost in the British Museum. As this sort of adventuring got in the way of her writing, she is now a civil servant, which is still surprisingly varied and at least comes with a pension. She has appeared in various

short-story collections and written two novels. For some reason she likes writing historicals.

DAVE HOSKIN is a writer living in Melbourne. He's written articles and interviews for *Metro*, *Eureka Street* and the *Australian Book Review*. Despite having no scientific background whatsoever, he's also written a disturbing number of articles for medical

magazines. He's made quite a few short films, done his share of

theatre, and sold hotdogs to angry drunks at three o'clock in the morning. His previous work for Big Finish was the short story

'Writing in Green' in the collection *Something Changed*. He claims that he's never worked in a Dead Letter Office. He's also adamant that his handwriting dOeSnT lOoK a biT liKE tHIs. But then he

would say that, wouldn't he?

PETE KEMPSHALL has written one previous *Short Trip* (the Fifth Doctor story 'Comforts of Home' in *The History of*

Christmas) while his other work for Big Finish includes *The Soul's Prism*, one of three novellas in the Bernice Summerfield book *Old Friends*. He's also responsible for putting a number of people off using the London Underground system, with his story for Eneit

Press's horror anthology *In Bad Dreams: Where Real Life Awaits*.

All of those stories he found much easier to write than this author bio,

which he has been told he has to squeeze into one hundred

words or

ANDY LANE is a respected media journalist who has also written ten non-fiction books on various aspects of film and television, seven well-reviewed original novels based on various TV series

(one of which spent several weeks in the UK's bestselling

hardbacks chart) 15 original short stories for various professional magazines and anthologies and a TV script and two storylines for the little-seen Sky One SF series *Space Island One*.

STEVE LYONS is the writer of 20 novels and numerous audio dramas, comic strips and short stories. He has 'worked with'

characters from the worlds of television, comic books, toys and

games, including the *X-Men*, *Strontium Dog* and *Sapphire & Steel*.

Much to his astonishment, this book contains his thirtieth licensed Doctor Who story.

GEORGE MANN is the Consultant Editor with BL Publishing, the publishing arm of Games Workshop, and is one of the team behind

the Solaris Books SF/Fantasy imprint. He is the editor of the

successful *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction* anthology series and the author of a number of fiction and non-fiction books, including *The Mammoth Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, *The Human Abstract*, *Time Hunter: The Severed Man* and *Time Hunter: Child of Time* (with David J. Howe). He has short fiction forthcoming in *APEX Digest* and *Triguorum*, amongst other venues, and is currently working on a new novel. He maintains a blog at

http://georgemann.wordpress.com

JAMES MILTON was born in Brisbane in the northern Australian state of Queensland, but grew up in various rural communities and seems to have settled in the tropics. He began writing a disturbingly large number of years ago and eventually sold two stories to early issues of the Australian magazine *Aurealis*. Thereafter, to all intents and purposes, he took a very long break punctuated by a story in the

fanzine *Myth Makers 14: Personal Rejections*.

IAN MOND is excited that he's finally had the opportunity to combine his three years as a public servant with his love for *Doctor Who*. His other, less policy-driven Who stories, can be found in *Short Trips* collections like *Past Tense* and *Monsters* (both written with Danny Oz), *A Day in the Life*, *The Centenarian* and *Defining Patterns*. He has also written the odd story for Benny Summerfield in collections like *Life During Wartime*, *A Life Worth Living*, *Something Changed* and *Collected Works*. He lives in Melbourne, Australia and promises that he did not waste a cent of taxpayers'

money writing the policy bits of this story at work. Even if he could have got away with it.

JAMES MORAN started out writing short stories while working in the computer industry. He won the UK Sci-Fi Channel 'Sci-Fi Shorts'

competition with his script *Cheap Rate Gravity*, which was made into a short film. His first movie was *Severance*, a horror starring Laura Harris and Danny Dyer. James has written for *Doctor Who* (*The Fires of Pompeii*, series 4), *Torchwood* (*Sleeper*, season 2.) and *Primeval* (season 3), *Spooks: Code 9* and *Law & Order: UK*. He loves movies, TV, reading, photography and documentaries about things that

explode. His website is at jamesmoran.blogspot.com

RICHARD SALTER tried for 15 years before being allowed to edit a short story collection professionally. He hopes he won't have to wait another 15 years until the next one (though it might take him that long to recover). Meanwhile he's kept busy with a number of short stories, mostly for Big Finish. His most recent work appeared in *Short Trips: The Ghosts of Christmas*. This collection contains his tenth published short story. He is indebted to all the contributors to this collection and apologises to all the great writers he had to turn away. Maybe we'll work together in 15 years time...

DALE SMITH is the author of the *Doctor Who* novel *The Many Hands*, and various short stories for Big Finish Productions. He is patiently waiting for the perfection of matter-transmission

technology, when he will be able to have an extra hour in bed and still get home before it gets dark. Although it may not be worth the 261

philosophical arguments about whether he is truly the Dale Smith who owns his home or just a perfect copy of him.

MARK STEVENS is a freelance writer/designer, bookseller and expatriated Brit who now lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his wife Jenney and faithful pooch, Andie. 'Larkspur' is his fourth short story for Big Finish. He's currently researching a semi-autobiographical book about British video-game culture (i.e.

playing lots of games), toying with the idea of writing a biography about Charles Messier and, like every other writer on the planet, has dreams of writing a bestselling series of novels for younger readers.

He would like to take this opportunity to give a shout out to the Barnes & Noble posse in Glen Allen, especially fellow *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* enthusiasts Cassidy and Lauren, otherwise he'll never hear the end of it

RICHARD WRIGHT is an author of dark fictions who lives in Glasgow, Scotland. His novel *Cuckoo* was published in paperback in the UK in 2002, and his plays *Haunter* and *Black Hearts* toured Scotland in 2001 and 2002 respectively. Richard's short stories

continue to crop up in anthologies and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. You can hunt them down via his website at

http://.www.richardwright.org, where you can also download free

books, or browse the inanities in his journal.

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Document Outline

- _FC
- _Index
- _ST25
- RC